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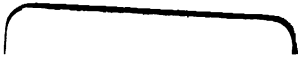
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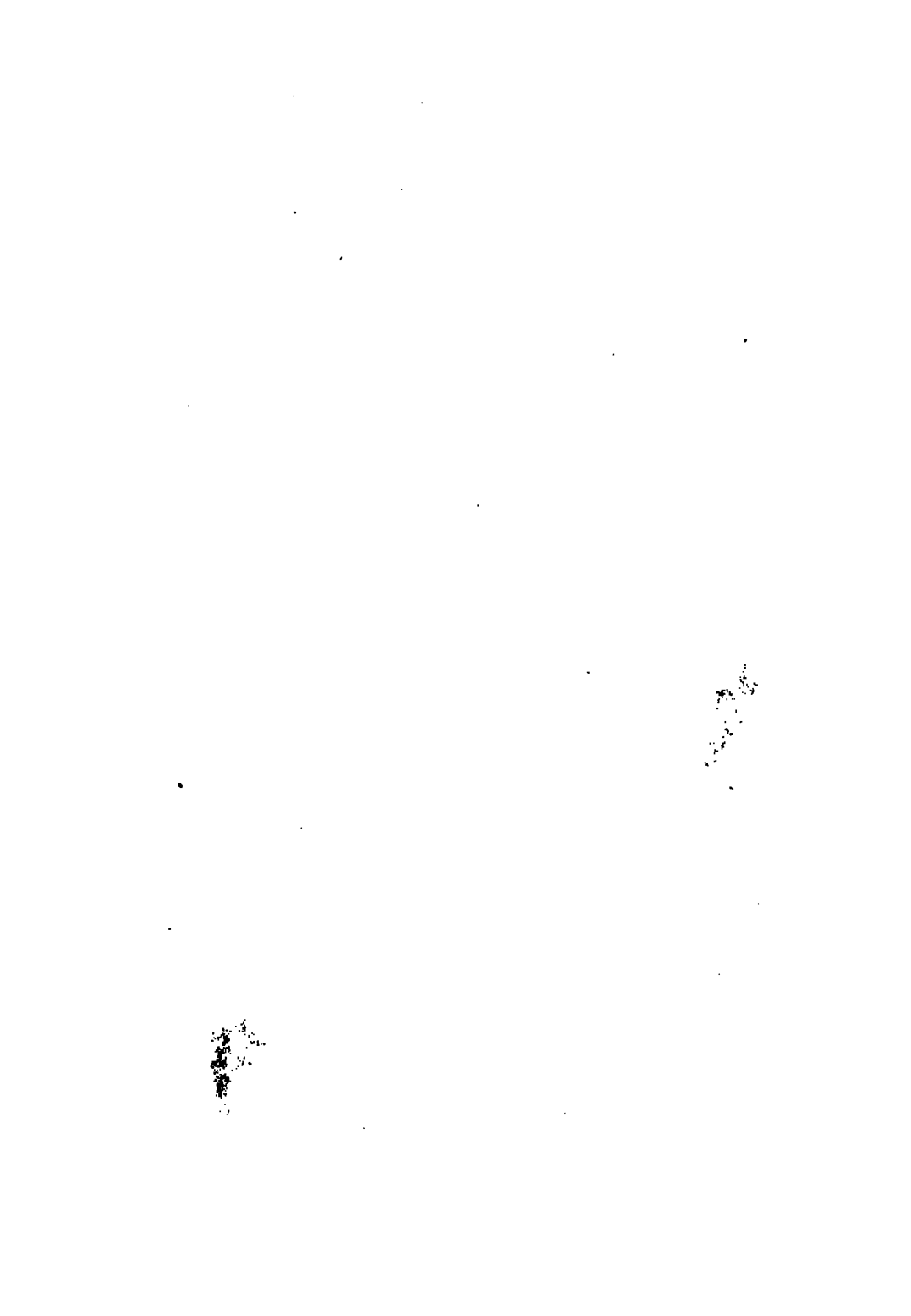
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THE
FAIR MAID OF TAUNTON.

A Tale of the Siege.

BY
ELIZABETH M. ALFORD.



London:
SAMUEL TINSLEY & CO.,
10, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND.
1878.

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To the Memory

OF THE

VERY REVEREND HENRY ALFORD, D.D.,

LATE DEAN OF CANTERBURY,

This Story is Affectionately Dedicated,

IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF THE KIND HELP

AND ENCOURAGEMENT RECEIVED FROM HIM

ON HER FIRST START AS AN AUTHOR,

BY HIS NIECE,

ELIZABETH M. ALFORD.

PREFACE.

I WISH to state clearly at the outset, how greatly I am indebted to Mr. Hepworth Dixon's interesting biography of "Robert Blake." I have taken that biography as my text-book for the historical part of my story, and have very frequently made use of Mr. Dixon's own words. I am the more anxious to state this fully, because it is not always easy in thus culling from another's work, and mingling his facts with one's own fiction, to quote the passages as a whole, and thus acknowledge one's debt by inverted commas and foot-notes. I cannot do better than refer my readers to the graphic descriptions of

Blake's defence of Lyme and of Taunton, in Chapters II. and III. of the said biography, if they would ascertain the amount of my obligation.

THE VIVARY, TAUNTON :

May 1st, 1878.

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THE FAIR MAID OF TAUNTON.



CHAPTER I.

HOW EDITH GUARDED HER SECRET.

THE good old town of Taunton presented a somewhat different appearance in the year of grace 1644, to that which it presents in this year of grace 1878. Then, as now, the lovely vale in which it stands was noted for the richness of its pastures, the luxuriance of its gardens and orchards, and the stately grandeur of its trees. Then, as now, the beautiful towers of St. Mary and St. James—both rebuilt on the old models within the last twenty years—were beacons of which its inhabitants might well be proud. Then, as now, the silvery peal of their bells were dear to the hearts of the people. But in

those days, ere the rise of the great manufacturing towns of the north, the trade and industry of the fair west was more striking and important than now. Taunton itself, famous for its woollen manufactures from the time of the Plantagenets, was at this period especially noted for its serges, and through the skill and industry of its inhabitants, had acquired wealth and power, and was, as we are told, famous "for the richness of its burghers and the beauty of its women."

Whether the latter distinction were in any way connected with the former, we cannot say; whether the wealthy burghers by means of their wealth were able to choose from the fairest maidens of the west for their wives, or whether the daughters of the soil, like its flowers and its fruit, owed their fair-favouredness to the place of their birth. We can only assume that in our heroine's case both forces were at work, for the blue blood of the Courtneys ran in her veins on her mother's side, and she had been born and bred in that favoured spot, "the vale of Taunton Dean."

Master Peynton was reputed the wealthiest

of all the rich burghers of Taunton, and had married early in life Ernestine Courtney, a lady comely and of high descent, but penniless and an orphan.

Edith was their only daughter. And just as her father had the reputation of being the richest of the burghers of Taunton, so was his daughter universally esteemed the fairest of its maidens. In the rich bloom of her complexion, in the golden tinge of her abundant coils of hair, in the fearless brightness of her deep blue eyes, Edith might have her rivals; but in the poise of her shapely head, in the dignity of her carriage, in the graceful ease of her every movement, she distanced all competitors. And yet so un-mindful was she of her beauty, so free from all craving for admiration, that there was not a fair maid in the town or neighbourhood who begrudged her the homage she received.

Madam Peynton had died when Edith was a child of ten, and this fact perhaps had given the girl that motherly devotion to her little brother Hugh, which was one of the strongest feelings of her life. Hugh was a

fair fragile boy of twelve at the time our story begins. A boy full of noble thoughts and high aspirations, with the compensation we so often find of superior intellectual development where the bodily presence is weak, for Hugh had been a cripple from his birth.

Edith's other brother, Marmaduke, was of an entirely different mould. A fine athletic young man, devoted to riding, hunting, and all active sports, but averse to study, and intolerant of business. A general favourite was Marmaduke, with his genial, light-hearted good-humour, and high animal spirits, and especially so with the country squires far and near, with whom he hunted the red deer over the wilds of Exmoor, or spent jovial evenings in their rambling old halls. This was the society the lad loved. He was flattered by being told that he was a true Courtney, and that he did not betray his burgher blood,—a species of flattery that did him great harm, making him despise honest labour, and think scorn of the intelligent brave burghers of Taunton. And although he could not look down upon his father,

whom he knew in his heart to be made of truer metal than himself, yet father and son jarred upon one another continually, their real love for each other making this want of sympathy between them all the more trying.

There was, too, in the eventful period of which we write, a danger of such want of sympathy enlarging into a divergence of opinion, that might be a matter of life or death between those nearest of kin, for the country was all alive with eager partisanship; for the King and sacerdotalism on the one side, and for the Parliament and puritanism on the other. And Master John Peyton, as well as the main body of Tauntonians, threw in their sympathies strongly with the latter side.

But just now they kept their opinions pretty much to themselves, for the town was garrisoned by Royalists under Colonel Reeves, having changed hands already from Royalist to Roundhead, and back to Royalist again. But although they preserved a discreet silence when in danger of being overheard by their unwelcome visitors, political excitement

was in reality at fever-heat among them, all eyes being eagerly turned to the little fishing-town of Lyme on the Dorsetshire coast, where the heroic Colonel Blake with his small force of five hundred men, augmented by volunteers from pretty Charmouth and other neighbouring villages to nearly a thousand, was withstanding, in a way that seemed almost incredible, the splendid Royalist army under the gallant Prince Maurice, nearly twenty thousand in strength. It was in the early days of that wonderful defence, and while the first tidings of the little garrison's stand was filling men's minds with wonder, that my story opens.

Master Peynton is sitting in his oak-panelled study, absorbed in reading a closely-written despatch. Edith is furtively watching him from the deep embrasure of the window, watching the eager flush on her father's usually calm face, and the light of triumph in his eye as he reads. At last the thickly-covered sheet is finished, and John Peynton turning to the window, sees his daughter's questioning glance turned upon him.

“What, Miss Inquisitive?” he says, with unwonted playfulness, “and must you too hear the glorious news? Not a word then to a single soul besides, not even to Marmaduke;” and he places the precious letter on her lap.

“Not even to Hugh, father?” she asks. “He is so eager to hear tidings of his hero Colonel Blake. He at least is safe to be silent as the grave.”

“Well, yes, the boy may see it if it will please him; but not a creature besides. Quick and take it to his chamber, if so it must be, and bring it back to me within half an hour; I will await you here.”

The girl took the letter in her right hand, and having thrust both into the pocket of her pretty apron, hurried from the room.

Hugh’s chamber—for the sick boy had a little sanctum of his own—was on the first floor, and as Edith was mounting the wide, oaken staircase, which led up from the entrance hall, she was accosted by a gay voice, and glancing up, she saw the handsome face of Percy Egerton smiling down upon her from over the balustrade.

Captain Egerton was a friend of Marmaduke's, and by the courtesy of Colonel Reeves, had been selected as custodian of Gable House in lieu of an entire stranger, during the present occupation of the town by Royalist troops. Probably too, a little skill as well as courtesy was shown in this selection, in the hope that his friend's society might secure the wavering Marmaduke to the cause of the King.

At all events the sight of his handsome face was very unwelcome to Edith just then, with her precious letter in her hand.

"Whither so fast, pretty maiden? And what treasure are you clutching so cautiously in the pocket of that bewitching apron of yours? I am officer in command here you know, and have a right to inquire into the secrets of Gable House."

"No gentleman has a right to insult a lady by making remarks upon her dress, above all in her father's house, Captain Egerton," answered the girl, drawing her slight figure up proudly, and preparing to pass him on the landing.

"By my troth, pretty mistress, but you

give yourself fine airs !” exclaimed the young man, a frown passing over his handsome face. “The time may come, let me warn you, when you may be glad to claim Percy Egerton as a friend.”

“We will await that time then, if you please sir ; meanwhile, prithee let me pass to my brother’s room,” said Edith, a flush of angry pride mounting into her fair cheeks at the implied threat of his words.

“I will go with you to your brother’s room,” said the young officer coolly. “It seemeth to me a likely spot for the concocting of treasonable plots.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said Edith, curbing her anger for caution’s sake ; “my brother at another time will be glad of your company, but when I am with him, he wants no one else. Pray let me pass !”

And as she spoke, she raised her bright blue eyes to the young cavalier’s face appealingly.

“You are too pretty to withstand,” answered the gallant ; “but surely you will give me ‘good-morrow’ ere you leave me, and allow me to touch your hand ?”

“Good-morrow, good sir,” said the girl, making a sweeping curtsey, and touching his outstretched palm with the tips of her left-hand fingers, as she glided past him.

“Not so fast, fair lady!” exclaimed the officer, seizing her right wrist; “naught but some secret cause would make Mistress Peynton forget her manners thus.”

A faint cry rose from Edith’s lips as she clutched the precious letter still tighter; a cry of fear, not of pain, although the grip was none of the softest. But she recovered her self-possession in a moment, and, turning flashing eyes upon her tormentor, exclaimed:

“Unhand me, sir, at your peril! Is this the boasted courtesy of you proud cavaliers? I will offer which hand you prefer, but not under compulsion, believe me!”

Egerton, startled by her indignant rebuke, loosed his hold. Quick as thought, Edith withdrew her right hand from its concealment, and placed it in that of the cavalier; and while he, falling on one knee, bent down to salute it in court fashion, she slid her left hand into the pocket, and drawing thence the precious letter, hid it in her bosom.

When Egerton raised his lowered head with some foolish compliment, Edith, instead of answering him coldly as usual, was all graciousness ; and rallying him gaily for his overstrained flattery, passed on with a lightened heart to her brother's chamber.

CHAPTER II.

HOW THE CAVALIER WAS FOILED BY THE
PURITAN MAIDEN.

THE room into which Edith entered was a low oak-panelled one, like the library below, but much smaller. It had a bay-window such as was common to other of the good houses in that part of the town, and which, together with their peaked gable fronts, gave a very picturesque appearance to the place.

Hugh was seated in an easy-chair in this window, which commanded a view of the open market-place with its fine stone cross, and of the bull-ring in front; with the vista of North Street beyond, and the distant Quantock Hills bounding the horizon. To the right a glimpse might be gained into East Street, from which the road led out

through East Gate into the great highway to Bridgewater and Bristol; but it was but a glimpse on that side, owing to the curve of the street. To the left stood, next to Gable House, the town-house of the Portman family, and next to that the low picturesque frontage of the Town-Hall, while next again, forming an angle with High Street, and thus showing two faces to welcome its guests, stood the famous White Hart Inn. The vicinity of this famous hostelry was a source of unfailling amusement to Hugh, especially in these stirring times, when distinguished strangers were continually passing to and fro, between the belligerents in the far west, and the King and his army at Oxford, and who paused naturally at the White Hart Inn for refreshment and change of horses.

But there was one sight to be seen from his window, which the boy prized above all the rest, and this was the graceful tower of St. Mary Magdalen rising above the intervening houses, and seeming to raise his thoughts heavenwards with it, as its pinnacles pointed to the blue vault above.

A word in description of Hugh before we

proceed. His father often told him that he showed no affinity to him in feature or complexion, for the latter was of the clear olive of sunny climes, and the oval face, sensitive features, and above all the lustrous dark eyes, betokened Italian blood, which must have descended to him through the intermarriage of some ancestor of his mother's, with a dark-eyed signorina of the South; perchance during a pilgrimage to the papal city, or while fighting as a mercenary in the cause of the Church.

The dark eyes were raised in joyful welcome as Edith opened the door, and gently sliding the bolt to, for further security, approached her brother with her finger on her lips, and the flush of excitement on her cheeks.

"Hist, Hugh!" she whispered as she drew the precious letter from her gown, and placed it on the boy's knee; "here is joyful news from the gallant defenders of Lyme, and I have had much ado to bring it you in safety. Be quick and let us read it together."

"I thought I heard you parleying on the landing," quoth Hugh; "and methought I

should like to have punished our fine-gentleman-spy for daring to detain my sister. But alas! I am but a poor lame lad, whose will and whose power are far apart."

"You must not be down-hearted now," said Edith, looking with such loving tenderness on her crippled brother as never shone in her eyes for any one else. "You and I can pray and give thanks at least, for the heroes who maintain the good cause. See, let us read this despatch together while yet we have time."

So Edith seated herself on a low chair beside Hugh, and wound her arm lovingly around his neck, as the two heads bent eagerly over the closely-written sheets.

A pretty contrast the pair made; and so thought Captain Egerton as he paused in his patrol of the landing, and peered through the key-hole to see what was going on within. But although he saw that his suspicions had been well founded, and that the fair Puritan maiden had hoodwinked him to some purpose, yet this office of spy jarred upon the proud spirit of the young cavalier; instinctively he

shrunk from intruding on the privacy of the brother and sister.

“She must perforce come back this way,” he said to himself; “and she shall not out-wit me again.”

So the pair were left in peace, and were so lost in eager sympathy with the heroic bravery of the defenders of Lyme, that they forgot both time and place.

“The heroism of our raw-recruits, and of all our brave little army, is wonderful,” wrote Master Peynton’s correspondent. “Deficient in clothing, short of food, and with little or no pay, they fight on, and endure with an uncomplaining patience, that nothing but a conviction of the sacredness of our cause could inspire. How long we shall have to endure, who can tell? Now that Prince Maurice has sat down to a regular siege, the limit to our sufferings from hunger may probably end but in death, unless reinforcements reach us ere that time by sea. But we do not shrink; all is confidence and enthusiasm at present, and we leave the future in Higher Hands. Our noble Colonel infuses his brave spirit into us all. Even women—besides tending the sick

and wounded—assist our soldiers at the barricades, loading their bandoliers for them unheeding of the musket-shots that whiz over their heads the while. The gallant Captain Pyne,* our master-of-horse, is invaluable. That hot-headed malignant, young Gregory Alford,† is happily in prison, having had to compound for his estates for fighting against

* Colonel Pyne received his death-wound during the siege, and the enemy took advantage of the absence of some of the men at his funeral to make one of their severest attacks on the heroic little town. See "Life of Blake."

† The name of Gregory Alford appears in Dring's Catalogue among those malignants who compounded for their estates, he compounded for ten pounds. He was imprisoned on account of his hostility to the Parliament, during the memorable siege of Lyme. He afterwards returned to Lyme and became its mayor, as his father had been before him. That he was a zealous persecutor is clear, from his reporting in later times to the Secretary of State, his capture of thirty men and eighty women in the head conventicle of Lyme, having broken the doors which were barricaded! "To-morrow," writes this active persecutor, "I shall be upon the Quakers and Anabaptists." This is the same Gregory Alford mentioned in Macaulay's "History," vol. i. pp. 579, 580, as so promptly giving warning of Monmouth's landing at Lyme in 1685, sending his servants to tell the gentry of Somerset and Dorset, and riding himself to Honiton to despatch the news to London.

the Parliament. This is well for us, or his restless activity, and zealous King and Church partizanship, would render him a troublesome foe. And in truth he would find no pleasant welcome in Lyme just now, in spite of the high esteem in which his father, our ex-mayor, and the family generally are held. But such is the misfortune of civil war, that even the upright may be blinded with bigotry and superstition, and oftentimes a man's foes are those of his own household."

The letter went on into further details connected with the siege, urging Master Peynton to use his influence with any of the Parliamentary leaders known to him, to entreat them to send succour ere it should be too late, to the devoted little fishing-town.

"Oh! what would I give to be by Colonel Blake's side now!" exclaimed Hugh; "to watch the calm enthusiasm on his face, to hear the quiet confidence of his voice as he gives his orders, undaunted by the overwhelming number of his foes! A cause must be a worthy one, let Marmaduke say what he likes, when men of such power as Blake hold their lives cheap for its sake."

“Englishmen would do that whichever way they deemed right,” said Edith warmly; “yes, and Englishwomen too methinks for the sake of those they love. I am sorry though for Master Gregory Alford; it must chafe such a restless spirit as his to be imprisoned in these stirring times. And you remember Hugh, he was truly courteous to us when we visited at his father’s house two summers since, to witness the boat-racing bouts.”

“Aye, sister mine,” quoth Hugh gaily; “he was not blind to our fair maid’s charms. Between him and his good father the mayor, Mistress Edith Peynton ran a risk of being spoiled I ween.”

“Nonsense, Hugh! you know how little store I set by such folly. Yet it was a merry time, and a pleasant sight withal to our inland eyes, to see the gaily-rigged boats dance on the blue waters, and to mark the different colours worn by the brave fisher-lads from along the Dorset and Devon coasts, that rowed for the prize. It was the Charmouth youth who came in first, I remember. Poor lads, some of them are starving now, I ween, behind

the earthworks at Lyme, among the brave volunteers of whom my father's letter speaks. Ah me!" sighed the maiden; "we were merry children Hugh, when we watched those gay races; and I feel so old now."

"Old at seventeen!" exclaimed Hugh; "pray what will you be at seventy? But hark, Edith! I hear our sentinel's tread outside. How do you mean to get this letter safe back to our father again?"

"Ah! how indeed!" exclaimed Edith, springing to her feet, and gazing out of the window as if for inspiration, whilst she folded the crumpled letter. "I have it!" she cried suddenly, making Hugh start, and gaze in his turn down below, to see what had given rise to the happy thought. All that he could discover out of the common was the donkey-cart of old Betty Coles from Kingston (a village some three miles distant), overturned in the middle of the road, the donkey lying kicking upon the broken shaft, and the goodly piles of brocoli and other vegetables scattered around.

But while he was looking, Edith, secret-
ing the letter as before, and flying to the

door, had called aloud to the unsuspecting sentinel:

“Oh! Captain Egerton, do come here! See, there is my old friend Betty Coles beside herself with trouble; won't you run down and help her with her donkey? I will put on my hat and follow you.”

The cavalier shrugged his shoulders at the nature of the task allotted him, but Edith looked so pretty in her excitement, and seemed so sure of his courteous compliance, that he thought there was no course open to him but to obey; and in the surprise and hurry of the moment, the letter was forgotten. It was not till he found himself beside old Betty in the middle of the road, dragging the refractory donkey on to his legs again, his handsome cavalier's curls blown over his face with the wind, and a crowd of grinning children surrounding him, that he became at once aware of the absurdity of his position, and of the probable reason of his being placed in it. Mortified and wrathful, he was turning angrily away from Betty's curtseys and thanks, when Mistress Edith joined the group, calm and self-possessed, awing the gaping children with her dignity.

“ For shame, Bob, Dick, Ned, all you bad boys !” she exclaimed ; “ to stand idly there, while this courteous gentleman sets you so good an example. Can you not help Betty to gather her goods together again, or must she and I do it alone ?”

So saying, she set gracefully and busily to work, gathering up the great heads of brocoli in her arms, and replacing them in Betty’s broken cart.

Percy Egerton no longer felt foolish or aggrieved ; the company you are in makes a vast difference it would seem !

Betty was brought into Gable House, and given food and drink to strengthen her shaken nerves ; and the shaft was mended at Edith’s expense, so the old woman had fallen on her feet, and never guessed that she owed her good luck to the gallant defenders of Lyme !

And Edith was very gracious to her gallant servitor, and even invited him to return with her to Hugh’s room, and read them one of the plays of his favourite Will Shakspeare.

Percy, nothing loth, took the bait, and a very pleasant afternoon the three spent in

Hugh's oak-panelled sanctum. For Percy was a good reader, and Edith and Hugh formed an appreciative audience. Moreover, there was a secret triumph lurking in Edith's heart, which made her laughter ripple over at slight provocation, and she felt a ready sympathy too with the difficulties of others, from her recent escape out of her own.

So Captain Egerton read on, regardless of time, until Master Peynton had had leisure to carry forth the precious letter, and to show it to certain trusted friends, and to despatch it by a swift post to London, accompanied by an earnest missive from himself to those in power; ere the conclave in Hugh's room was broken up.

"Fair mistress," quoth Percy at last when the reading was over, "it irks me to seem inquisitive, but had you not a letter in your possession just now, when I detained you against your will?"

"I had, sir," said Edith frankly, looking at him fearlessly out of her clear blue eyes.

"And, pray, where is that letter now fair mistress, if I may make so bold as to ask?" pursued Egerton.

“That sir I do not know ; I returned it to my father in a hurry ere joining you in the rescue of Betty,” answered Edith, with the slightest possible glance of merriment in her eyes.

“By my troth, you did ?” exclaimed Percy ; “commend me to a Puritan maiden for craft and subtlety ! But I will be even with you fair mistress, yet.”

So saying, with a flushed and angry countenance, he made a profound bow to his young adversary, and quitted the apartment.

CHAPTER III.

HOW MARMADUKE WENT HIS WAY.

PERCY EGERTON took himself severely to task, on the night of Betty Coles' adventure, for having allowed himself to be so easily beguiled by a pretty face.

"What an idiot I am!" he exclaimed, pacing his room indignantly, and gnawing his dark moustache; "as though I had not seen handsome ladies enough at court and elsewhere, to make me impervious to such fleeting charms! The idea of a burgher-maiden, a rebel and a puritan to boot, beguiling me is too absurd! I will avoid her for the future, and keep a sharper look-out on her designing father. These western rebels bid fair to give us trouble enough, ere we teach them their duty to their liege Lord and King."

Accordingly, the next day found the young

cavalier stern and severe in his demeanour, hardly vouchsafing a 'good-morrow' to his unwilling host when they met at the breakfast board. But Master Peynton's head was too full of other thoughts to notice the alteration in his guest's manner; and Edith was far too busy to give heed to it either, which last fact galled the cavalier's pride, and caused him quickly to forget the resolution he had made to avoid her.

Edith was too busy we say, for had she not to look after her maidens in the morning, and to do the dainty part of the cooking herself, making savoury dishes for her father with her own fair hands, and from receipts handed down through generations as heirlooms to the daughters of the house?

Moreover, there were her studies to pursue; and studies too of no trivial nature. For Master Peynton was a deeply-read scholar himself, and desired his daughter to come no whit behind her brothers in education. For although "Oxford Locals" and "Colleges of Preceptors" were not in those unenlightened days, yet the remembrance of Lady Jane Grey was still fresh in the minds of her Protestant

admirers, and Master Peynton had set his heart on modelling his daughter's mind after her pattern. With this view he had engaged a very learned Oxford student, Master Lawrence by name, to dwell in his house, and conduct the education of his children on an equal footing. And as Edith was of quicker apprehension than Marmaduke, in all save sporting lore, she really took the lead among Master Lawrence's pupils.

The master himself was rather a riddle. He occupied a small attic in Gable House, where he spent a large portion of his time, in the midst of a sort of fortification of books. Rare books too many of them were, for he had been a collector from childhood; and in his travels abroad, and in his peregrinations at home, he had amassed fresh treasures. He seemed to have no belongings, and no one knew whence he had sprung. The one patent fact to all was his learning; and exaggerated reports even of this grew current, from his abstracted and scholarly air. He was a man of few words, and consequently one sentence of praise from him was worth more than a whole paragraph from any one else.

Marmaduke had never been honoured with one such sentence, and Edith but on rare occasions. Hugh it was on whom the master's approval descended in fullest measure, and it was in his room that the lessons were given.

On a certain morning, several weeks after the events recorded in our last chapter, we find Edith preparing for her master in the kitchen. For the pleasant readings which had been going on ever since the day of Betty's adventure, in spite of Percy's resolutions to the contrary, had stolen the time from severer studies, and Edith had to make amends for this by economising all her spare moments. Thus we find her on this sweet morning, late in May, standing by the kitchen fire, her sleeves tucked up to her elbows, and her dress protected by a spotless stomacher apron, while with one hand she stirs the strawberry jam which is simmering on the hob, and in the other holds a well-worn volume of Plato's Dialogues.

Presently a quick eager tread sounds on the passage, and Marmaduke hastily enters. He starts on seeing Edith, and coming towards

her says, with that genial smile of his which his friends all find so winning :

“Wherefore so busy fair sister? Meseems in trying to do two things at once, you will perchance spoil the both. Let me have your spoon while you go off with your book.”

“Nay, I would rather give you my book than my spoon,” replied the girl. “Master Lawrence grieves sorely over your irregularity in your studies of late, my brother. Will you not join us to-day? it is many a week since you and I have read wise old Plato together,” holding the book towards him as she spoke.

“And it will be years maybe before we read him together again child,” replied Marmaduke with that assumption of manliness which had grown upon him of late. “Men have not time to puzzle out the thoughts of the great dead, whilst the lives of the great living are in jeopardy. But where is Sally? I came to seek her, and to bid her pack me up good store of provision, for I am bent on a long ride to-day.”

“She is close at hand, I will call her.

But you will not ride alone my brother? The whole country is infested with wild unscrupulous bands of soldiers; I shall be restless with fear till you return."

"Then you will be restless a long time little one," said Marmaduke, looking affectionately into the eager up-turned face, "for maybe I shall never come back."

The spoon and the book fell simultaneously from Edith's hands, as she threw her arms around Marmaduke's neck, and sobbed out her entreaties that he would not leave her.

"Hush! here comes Egerton, you would not have him find us crying like children," said Marmaduke, gently unclasping Edith's arms as Percy entered the kitchen booted and spurred. He was beating a hasty retreat when Marmaduke recalled him.

"Do not go away Egerton; we have no minutes to lose," he said. "You have come just in time to stop our folly. There is nothing like a girl's tears to unman a fellow, and I had intended to give Edith the slip, believing her to be with Hugh and Master Lawrence." Then changing his tone he added

gaily: "What say you to my sister's industry? making strawberry jam to feed us moderns, and discoursing of the immortality of the soul with the ancients, at one and the same time!"

"I can only say that both ancients and moderns are too highly favoured in dividing the attention of one so fair," answered Percy with perfect gravity, picking up the fallen Plato, and handing it to Edith with a graceful bow.

The girl forgot her tears for the time in a merry laugh, as she said archly:

"Is that the way people talk at court? And have they always to do it with so grave a face?"

Then seeing a mortified expression on Egerton's features, she hastened to apologise.

"You must forgive my rudeness and levity sir, but I am so unused to flattery. And burgher-maiden as I am, I fear my manners want mending."

Egerton looked at her admiringly as she made her naïve confession, hanging her head demurely the while, a faint colour suffusing her fair face. But he only said rather coldly:

“I thank you, mistress, for the lesson you have taught me. I will keep my foolish tongue within bounds for the future ; for the present I bid you farewell.”

“Oh ! will you not tell me where you are taking my brother, good sir ?” exclaimed Edith, all her former fears returning. “You will not lead him into danger ? you cannot have come into our home to steal him away !”

“Hush, Edith !” exclaimed Marmaduke almost angrily. “It is my own doing entirely. I cannot fight against my conscience. ‘Honour the King,’ is my motto, and shall be till I die. I cannot help it child, that in serving him I wound those I love. Bid my father and Hugh farewell, and do not grieve that I go where my duty calls me. I shall think of you all in my prayers, as you will think of me in yours. And now for Sally’s stores.”

So saying, he kissed Edith once more, and hastened from the room.

“And will you sometimes couple my name with his in your intercessions, sweet mistress ?” said Egerton in a strangely altered voice. “Believe me, we shall both need them in the scenes to which we are going.”

“I will!” said Edith through her falling tears. “May the good God keep you both, and help us all to do the right in these days of dire perplexity!”

She was dimly conscious, through her blinding tears, of some one kneeling before her, of dark pleading eyes raised to hers, and of her hand being caught and pressed to somebody’s lips. But when the mists had cleared away, she was alone in the kitchen, and staring with startled eyes at the blank stone flags at her feet. And yet it was not all a dream, for Sally bustled in complaining that Master Marmaduke had despoiled her larder, and the fruit was bubbling and hissing on the fire, recalling Edith to her work.

An hour had hardly elapsed, and she was ladleing the fragrant jam into small jars, when a quick eager step was heard entering the house, and her father’s voice called her in tones so exultant, that she could hardly believe them to be his. But there was reason enough to account for the unwonted eagerness of step and voice, as Edith soon found on joining her father in his library.

“I have glorious news, my child,” he

said ; “ let us thank God and take courage. The siege of Lyme is raised at last. The half-starved garrison descried a sail rounding Portland Point on the twenty-third of this month, and the next morning the fleet of the Earl of Warwick was seen in the offing. The gallant sailors were so moved by the state of the gaunt, half-starved heroes, that they gave them of their own stores. With strength and energy thus recruited they resisted the last desperate attacks of the besiegers, till at length, mortified beyond measure, Prince Maurice abandoned the siege, having lost two thousand cavaliers in the struggle. Essex is moving westward with his large army, and the Prince knew that to hold on any longer would be useless. Ah ! what would I give to be in my friend Robert Blake’s place now ! Hugh may well call him a hero, indeed ! ”

But Edith’s face did not kindle at the tidings. Instead, she looked up almost piteously into her father’s face as he ceased his eager talk, and said :

“ But oh ! father, what of that two thousand ? ”

“Aye—what indeed? They fought like Englishmen, our foes though they were, and died the death of the brave.”

“Do you think they had sisters and brothers, father?” Edith asked again, clasping her hands lovingly over her father’s arm.

“Aye, child, to be sure they had; and mothers and lady-loves too, belike; but why so sorrowful?”

“Marmaduke is gone, father; he bade me bid you good-bye. He is gone with Captain Egerton, but of his own free will. He could not fight he said against his conscience, and that his motto should ever be, ‘Honour the King.’”

Master Peynton staggered, and sinking into his arm-chair, hid his face in his hands for a moment. Then he lifted a hard, set face, and said:

“I knew the boy had his vagaries, but I never thought he would have treated me thus. He is a son of mine no longer. You and Hugh will divide my substance between you.”

In vain Edith wept, and pleaded her brother’s cause. Her father, so rarely deaf

to her words, turned from her now with what seemed almost heartless coldness.

“Let me hear his name mentioned no more,” he said; “or I shall begin to suspect that you too are a renegade, beguiled perchance, by yon smooth-tongued flatterer Percy Egerton.”

Stung by the implied taunt, so alien to her father’s lips, Edith ceased her pleadings, and flew away to Hugh’s chamber, to pour out to him the story of their woes.

“The blow came upon my father in the hour of triumph with double force,” said Hugh. “His mood will soften by-and-by. You, at least, are precious to him as the apple of his eye, and your words will carry weight in the end.”

And so Edith found comfort and hope, as she had often done before, beside the sick boy’s couch. He, who was so afflicted himself, being ever the readiest to cheer others in sorrow.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW COLONEL REEVES MARCHED OUT, AND COLONEL BLAKE MARCHED IN.

ALTHOUGH Hugh's cheering words to Edith did not seem at all likely to come true, although the slightest reference to Marmaduke brought a frown on Master Peyton's face, and acted like a sudden chill on his manner, yet he was anything but cast down just now. In truth, there was a light in his eyes, and an eager expectancy in his whole aspect, that puzzled Edith not a little. But not even to her was the secret of that restrained excitement confided. She and Hugh often talked over possibilities together. Something of importance must be brewing, to move so greatly the calm, self-contained master of Gable House.

"Hugh," said Edith, one morning, "what

can be going to happen? Father has bid me prepare all our spare rooms for possible visitors. Now, too, above all times, when the garrison of the town has been lessened, by Prince Maurice's withdrawing so many of Colonel Reeves' soldiers to his ranks, our whilom guest, and poor Marmaduke too I fear, among them. What can it all mean think you?"

"It means good, not evil, to our cause, or my father would never look as he does," said Hugh, his face kindling.

"It is hard that *we* should be kept in the dark," said the girl, with an impatient gesture. "You and I might at least be trusted."

"I can guess," said Hugh, with flashing eyes; "but I dare not put my thoughts into words; the scheme seems almost too daring an one even for him. But if it be as I guess, my father is right indeed to be cautious. Only think Edith, if you and I might perchance be privileged to suffer in the good cause! Only think if the heroism of Lyme were destined to be rivalled here! But hist! here

comes Master Lawrence, and we must get to our books."

But even Master Lawrence's learned gravity seemed unsettled to-day. Surely there was electricity in the air, moral if not physical! The tutor wandered from the usual strict bounds of his scholarly teachings, into an enthusiastic eulogy of liberty, keeping his listeners spell-bound by the vigorous eloquence of his declamation, so unlike the severe simplicity of his usual mode of expression. Hugh's eyes kindled to a yet brighter light, as he followed the master's rapid sketch of the various struggles for liberty in the past, and both he and Edith had forgotten the present in their intense sympathy with the heroes of bygone ages, when suddenly a clear shrill trumpet-call sounded on the stillness of the July day, startling the three dreamers in Hugh's chamber into thrilling present life.

Up started Edith and flew to the window, Hugh seized his crutches and followed her, while Master Lawrence had rushed off like a madman, and was now seen by his astonished pupils striding along the road below, his black

Academic gown flying out behind him, and his cropped head bared, while he frantically waved his scholar's cap in the air.

But Master Lawrence's oddity was scarcely noticed in the general excitement. The quiet sleepy town seemed bewitched. There was a rushing of many feet, contrasting with the tramp of regular soldiery, and above all there was the undefinable sense of suppressed excitement, and enthusiasm, amid the townsfolk, which stirred the eager curiosity of our young friends to the utmost.

"Oh! Hugh, I must go and see what is happening," said Edith. "I wish you could come too, but the crush would be too much for you."

"And it is not fit that you should go out alone in all this turmoil either; there may even be fighting going on," said Hugh. "See, they all press towards the East Gate. It must be as I guessed. Blake, released from Lyme, has marched upon us, and surprised our weakened garrison! May God be with the right!"

"Ah! there is my father!" exclaimed Edith. "Hugh, I *must* go. I will wrap myself up

in Marmaduke's old riding-cloak, and draw the hood over my head, and no one will pause to look at me. And then I will come back and tell you all."

So without awaiting further remonstrance, the girl ran off; and Hugh watched a cloaked and hooded figure issue from the house, and speedily make its way through the crowds of people that thronged the roads, till it too was lost to view in the bend of the street, that hid the East Gate from his sight.

Eagerly he watched and waited. Poor Hugh! never before had he felt his affliction as now. Earnest-hearted as the foremost of the actors in the drama that was being played out before him, and yet cut off from it all, not even able to gain a crumb of information as to what was going forward so near him! Long he waited, calming himself at last into a more patient frame of mind, for no one seemed inclined to come back and tell him the tale. At last, after watching the passing to and fro of cavalier officers, between the Castle where Colonel Reeves was stationed and that mysterious East Gate, his patience

was rewarded. For the well-known bugle summoned all the soldiers of the garrison to assemble, and then the whole force of cavaliers, with Colonel Reeves at their head, marched through the town to the sound of martial music, till they too disappeared from Hugh's view in the direction of the East Gate.

For awhile all was still. Then at last, when the surrendered garrison were well on their way towards Bridgwater, St. Mary's bells suddenly broke forth in a peal of welcome, and the sky seemed rent with the shouts and hurrahs of the Puritan people, as the hero of the west, the gallant Colonel Blake, entered the devoted town after this bloodless victory.

Before Hugh had had time to realise what had happened, a cloaked and hooded figure rushed into his apartment, and Edith, throwing off her disguise, and looking radiantly beautiful in her excitement, rejoined him at the window. She was but just in time, for the victorious procession, with Colonel Blake at its head, was already nearing Gable House. But quick as thought, Edith caught up a bouquet of fresh roses, which she herself had

placed in a vase on Hugh's table that morning, and threw it so deftly at the Colonel as he rode slowly past, that it alighted on the saddle before him. The Colonel raised his eyes, and taking the bouquet in one hand, with the other bared his head in courteous acknowledgment to fair Edith. Many eyes besides his were raised also in the same direction, as Edith waved her white kerchief in eager welcome. But suddenly she drew back, for words fell upon her ears that brought a deep blush to her cheeks :

“Who is it?” was asked by sundry of the new-comers, of the townsfolk by their sides. And the ready answer was given :

“The fair maid of Taunton, Mistress Edith Peynton. We are proud of our fair maidens, rest assured ; for they are as good as they are fair. And their mettle, meseems, may be put to the proof, ere this day's deed has worked its end.”

“Aye, aye. But they are too dainty, methinks, to fight alongside of us, like the brave fisher-lasses of Lyme,” said another voice ; and so the procession passed on.

Presently up came Master Lawrence,

flushed and eager, but with a frown withal on his face.

“What news, master?” asked Hugh eagerly.

“Fine news, indeed!” replied the master, relaxing his frown. “Blake, knowing that our brave but imprudent Earl of Essex, had entangled himself and his fine army among the Cornish highlands in following Prince Maurice, and that Charles purposed marching west from Oxford so as to place Essex between two fires; the gallant Blake I say, conceived the brilliant idea of joining his own flying corps with the regiment of Sir Thomas Pye, and seizing Taunton, the key to the west, thus giving Essex time to extricate himself. This bold plan he has carried out successfully so far, without, as you see, the loss of a single soldier. Praised be God for it! But,” added the master, the frown gathering again, “methinks it ill becomes a young maiden to adopt male attire, and risk impertinence by mingling with the rabble, even on so great an occasion.”

Edith hung her head in confusion. What lynx-eyes Master Lawrence possessed, in spite of his preoccupied air! She had seen him in

the crowd, but had fancied herself unobserved. Rallying her spirits, however, she looked up and answered him meekly.

“I did but follow, sir, where my good master led. Surely in his footsteps I could not err?”

“Tush, tush!” exclaimed the master fretfully; “who ever yet found a woman at a loss for a reply?”

Later on that same evening, when our trio were assembled in the dining-room awaiting Master Peynton’s return to supper, other steps than his were heard on the passage, and the hearts of the brother and sister began to beat loud with expectancy. And anon their father entered, ushering in the hero of the day.

“And so this is my little friend Edith of former days, grown into a stately maiden, forsooth!” said the Colonel, coming forward into the cheerful lamplight, and extending his hand in kindly greeting. “May your path in life be lined by flowers as sweet, my daughter, as those you showered on me to-day!”

“And this is my poor boy, Hugh,” said

Master Peynton, drawing the beautiful cripple forward into notice. "I can assure you, you have no more ardent admirer than he among your many brave followers: although, poor lad, he cannot prove his devotion by deeds of prowess."

"Poor no longer, father, since I have lived to see this day," said Hugh eagerly, raising his lustrous eyes to his hero's face.

Blake looked with interest at the boy's kindling countenance, and said, laying his hand gently on his head:

"We need such as you to pray for, and to believe in us, my young friend, as much as we need soldiers to fight."

"My prayers you shall always have, sir, as long as I have lips to utter them, or a heart to lift up in the good cause," said Hugh, almost solemnly. "And for the rest, if I cannot fight, I may, perchance, be privileged to suffer, or even to die, in the glorious task you have allotted us."

Blake's brow contracted as with a sudden pang at these words, and turning to Master Peynton, he said sadly:

“The brave boy has touched on my one sorrow at this moment of triumph. Well had it been for you, brave Tauntonians, I fear, had my plan failed, or been never conceived. And yet we must act as our conscience dictates, and leave the issues in the hands of the All-Wise. If you brave people suffer, it will be for the salvation of England’s liberty and faith,—that thought must uphold us.”

“There are worse things than to die in so good a cause, methinks,” said Hugh quietly.

“Aye; to die one’s self were easy,” said his father, looking anxiously at his son’s bright cheeks; “not so to see those we love suffer. But away with such dismal thoughts on such a day, and let us to supper.”

And so the group gathered round the well-filled table, and all forebodings of future trials were laid aside, while they conversed on the wonderful defence of Lyme, and the succour that had come none too soon.

After the meal was ended, Master Peyton called his household together for family worship as was his wont, and they then

departed to their several resting-places ; but the master of Gable House accompanied his guest to the Castle, and sat with him late into the night consulting over grave affairs.

CHAPTER V.

HOW WYNDHAM SENT HIS LETTER, AND HOW
BLAKE REPLIED TO IT.

THE joy in London over Blake's brilliant and unexpected achievement was great; bonfires were lighted in his honour, and the Parliamentary chiefs hastened to appoint him Governor of Taunton. But the task he had set himself was by no means an easy one, and the joyful triumph of his Taunton friends was turned into sad and sober anxiety ere long.

That month of July was a memorable one to the Roundheads, for on the second day of it Cromwell had defeated Prince Rupert at Marston Moor. But this defeat, and Blake's capture of Taunton, stirred up the Royalists to still more active measures. The King, who had marched to Bristol, would not risk detention before Taunton, but proceeded by

the Quantock hills and a circuitous route through North Devon to Exeter, where the Queen was now residing, and which still held out for her, though invested by Parliamentary troops. The bad cross-roads caused some delay, and had Essex been equal to the emergency, Blake's obstruction of the great western highway, might have given him time to reduce Exeter, and to force Prince Maurice to engage in a decisive battle, before the King's army had achieved their difficult march. But Essex was surrounded with difficulties; having been led astray into a country unknown to him, and hostile to his cause. So that when the King joined Prince Maurice at Liskeard, they found they had not even to risk a battle, for Essex, finding himself shut up in a narrow gorge by the sea, with an army wasted and dispirited, provisions running short, and a mutinous spirit gaining among his followers, gave up in despair, and fled by sea at night with a single attendant, leaving his deserted army to their fate. Left without a leader, there was nothing for them but to surrender at discretion. Thus the devoted Taunton garrison had no

force left to share with them the attention of the victorious Royalists.

Blake, however, was equal to the emergency, and not only strengthened as far as possible the defences of the town, but carried fire and sword into the enemy's quarters. With a handful of intrepid men, among whom Master Peynton, and the whilom student Master Lawrence, were conspicuous; he had hung upon the left flank of the Royal army on its westward march, cutting off stragglers and levying supplies; and a squadron of his horse startled even the court ladies at Exeter, by appearing under its walls whilst the people were in the midst of their rejoicings, over the King's successes in Cornwall.

These successful sallies raised the spirits of Blake's followers to a high pitch of daring, and the frequent and unexpected visits to the weaker Royalist towns and fortresses, kept the country in a continual state of alarm, and prevented the King, even after his victory in Cornwall, from settling the west country in his own interest.*

But the victorious Royalists, in their turn,

* See Hepworth Dixon's "Life of Robert Blake."

carried terror into the suburbs of Taunton. Charles himself made a rapid march to London ; but parties of horse and foot from the various Royalist strongholds, infested the luxuriant valley of the Tone, spreading terror among the peaceful part of the community. Evil reports of brutal cruelty reached the ears of our friends in Gable House, making Edith's fair face turn pale, and Hugh's eyes flash with indignation. But a stern satisfaction still sat on Master Peynton's brow ; it would have seemed that he had been born a soldier, from the unflinching coolness and intrepidity with which he took to his new calling. As for the ascetic Master Lawrence, he appeared still more metamorphosed by the events passing around him. His prematurely grave face took on a look of youth, his learned, bent head stood erect on his shoulders, and he became as it were a shadow of Colonel Blake, and his right hand on many an emergency.

It was well the Governor was supported by able and enthusiastic followers, for the task he had set himself was a difficult one indeed. Walls to the town there were none ; and the

castle, though dating from Saxon times, and though it had been a hold of importance, tradition said, in the Wars of the Roses, was now partly in ruins. It still retained, however, walls, gates, and drawbridges, and was strengthened by a double moat. And more important, perhaps, still, arms, provisions, and powder, had been found stored in it by its new occupants.

The castle, such as it was, served to cover the entrance to the town by the north road, which crossed the river Tone by means of a wooden bridge.

The great highway from London entered the town through East Gate, which was defended only by a narrow passage closed by a solid oak door.

Whilst the West Gate, through which the road passed out towards Exeter, was flanked only by a sort of block-house, called New Castle.

With these slight helps, Blake did what he could. He had strong barricades thrown across the roads, and breastworks raised at the gates. Still, when all was done, it said much for the courage of the defenders, and

for their confidence in their leader, and in the justness of their cause, that they calmly awaited the issue of events.

The task of reducing Taunton was committed to Colonel Wyndham, the Governor of Bridgwater, distant only twelve miles from Taunton. Wyndham was an old political enemy of Blake's, and hoped to gain both local and public honour by the task allotted him.

Edith and Hugh were seated in their favourite resort, his bow window, one day, when suddenly their ears were startled by a trumpet-call, at the East Gate of the town.

"Oh, Hugh! they are come already!" exclaimed Edith, clasping her hands, and looking at her brother with dilated, terror-stricken eyes.

"And is my sister so little of a heroine that she trembles at the outset?" said Hugh. "Surely a true Puritan maiden should have more faith than to quake, in the face even of danger."

"Had not that good clergyman faith, Hugh, who was met by Sir Francis Dodding-

ton, but a short time since, not so far from our town; and did his brave answer to the Cavalier's query, 'Who art thou for, priest?' 'For God and His Gospel' save him from the pistol-shot of the knight?" asked Edith, sadly.

"It did better far than that," said Hugh, his face kindling as he spoke; "it earned him a martyr's crown."

"Ah! Hugh, would I were more like you! Is it that we women are more timid by nature than men; or is it that we fear insult worse even than death, that our hearts sink at times like these? Or is it, ah yes! that must be the truth, that my faith is not strong and unclouded as thine, my brother?"

And Edith threw her arms around Hugh, and let fall a few tears; then rising, declared herself strengthened, and her intention to go and learn what had happened.

"If only Sir Francis be not among them I shall not fear," she said; "that story has haunted me like a nightmare, ever since Master Lawrence told it us. And yet they say he is a brave Cavalier. Alas! how blinding are men's passions when once the leash is

let loose ! But, hark ! they are sounding a parley ; and see, our Governor goes forth to meet the messenger without a ruffle on his brow. A letter is handed to him, and he retires to read it to the burghers. Oh ! Hugh, would I were a man !”

“And would I were one, too, to stand beside my father now,” said Hugh. “But patience, Edith, you cannot go forth ; we shall hear all anon. Master Lawrence never forgets us, whatever betides.”

And true enough ere long, the master hurried panting into the room.

“What news ? what news ?” was the eager greeting from both his auditors.

“Colonel Wyndham has come from Bridgewater, summoning us to surrender, and threatening the town with fire and sword in case of refusal, in the menacing letter he has addressed to the burgesses,” said the master calmly.

“And what did our brave burghers answer ?” inquired Edith, all thought of fear lost in excitement.

“The Governor answered for them, short and to the point ; I will read you a copy I took

of his letter. 'These are to let you know that as we neither fear your menaces, nor accept your proffers; we wish you, for the time to come, to desist from all overtures of the like nature unto us, who are resolved, to the last drop of our blood, to maintain the quarrel we have undertaken; and I doubt not but the same God who hath hitherto protected us, will bless us with an issue answerable to the justness of our cause; however, to Him alone shall we stand or fall!'

"Spoken like a hero!" exclaimed Hugh. "And what said Wyndham to that?"

"Finding his threats useless, he sent another trumpeter, almost entreating the Governor to surrender, representing the impossibility of defending an unwalled town against the Royalist forces, and urging that the attempt could but lead to an unnecessary waste of Christian blood," replied the master.

"There I feel with him," said Edith with a quivering lip. "Forgive me, Hugh, forgive me, master; it is not for myself I shrink, but surely fellow-christians and fellow-countrymen should pause long, ere they send one

another's souls into eternity in the fury of combat."

An expression of solemn awe transformed the girl's face ; the master looked with reverence upon the fair pupil he had been wont to chide for her levity, and there was an expression of pain in Hugh's eyes, as he fixed them on his sister's face, and said :

"True, Edith, that is a solemn thought ; but yet we must remember that the cause of our quarrel is one that may affect millions yet unborn. It is sad, indeed, that men's passions so soon kindle in the heat of battle ; and yet, methinks, in so grave a cause as ours, no personal feeling should be possible. It is for our religion and our freedom we fight, not for conquest or ill-will. But what answer made our Governor to the second appeal, prithee, master ?"

"He but referred him to his former answer," replied Master Lawrence, "and, hark ! the firing has even now begun. I must hasten to my post."

So saying, he laid his hand caressingly on Hugh's head, cast a hasty glance at Edith, with something that looked like a blush on

his pallid cheeks, and hurried from the room.

Yes, the siege was at last begun. Wyndham, after receiving Blake's second reply, advanced along the road from Bridgwater, hoping to make a stand in the meadows on that side, and thus encourage friends from within the town to join him. But Blake had wisely foreseen that probably the chief fighting would go on near East Gate, and had planted some of his artillery there, and had garrisoned the quaint old alms-houses that still flank the right side of the street, and the houses too on the left, with Musqueteers. Thus, on Wyndham's attempting to make a demonstration in the fields without, a sudden sally from the East Gate obliged him to defend himself, and finally to quit his position.

After this repulse, Wyndham's troops tore up the roads, and barricaded them with trees, thus cutting off communication with the Roundheads without the town, and preventing market-carts, with their valuable contents, from entering it. This last achievement was of terrible importance to the

besieged, and although their hearts still beat high with hope and courage, yet the more thoughtful could not but look grave at the prospect of want, even perchance of starvation, before them.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW HUGH DISPOSED OF HIS DINNERS.

THE real trials of the besieged had begun now in good earnest. The blockade continued for several months with more or less strictness; and in spite of the vigorous sallies, by means of which the besieged managed to break through the lines of the besiegers from time to time, and thus bring back fresh supplies, provisions soon began to grow short, and that most awful question of want of food to become imminent.

Even in Gable House this state of things had made itself felt, and our heroine had grown both pale and thin, since we saw her throwing her roses at the victorious Colonel Blake. But if the roses had gone from her cheeks, the light had but deepened in her eyes, for all her powers of body and mind

were called out now, and she felt she was living as she had never lived before. There was no more quaking at unknown dangers, now that so near and terrible a one, had to be grappled with.

Day by day some fresh dilemma arose, and almost daily some new case of distress came under her ready sympathy. For the town so flourishing erewhile with its brisk woollen trade, had now to maintain the many hands that had worked its prosperity. And the looms being still for lack of material to work upon, and provisions so dear, something very like starvation showed its ugly face in many a back street and alley, and by many an honest hearth.

Edith, being her father's housekeeper, and his house being now full of guests, had ample work at home. But, notwithstanding this, never a day passed that she did not steal out in the twilight, wrapped in a demure grey cloak, and with a basket on her arm, to seek out some special sufferers. Few took heed of the grey-shrouded figure that flitted so swiftly along in the dusk ; no one but herself knew

that the basket was chiefly provided, by the savings from her own allotted meals.

“Never mind if Hugh has only enough,” she said to herself. “I am strong and can stand a little hunger, and I am glad to know something of the pinch myself, or I could not fully appreciate the noble heroism of these poor people, who suffer so patiently.”

Master Peynton himself saw but little of his children or home just now, for he was almost always with Colonel Blake. Thus Edith was left pretty much to her own resources, her one great anxiety being Hugh's comfort. And this anxiety grew keener as time went on, and she saw his beautiful face grow thinner, and the dark lustrous eyes grow ever brighter, as his strength declined. And yet, every day she herself took up his meals to him into his sanctum, where he chose to have them now that the house was full of guests. And whoever else went short, Edith always contrived that Hugh's plate should be well and daintily supplied. Yet, in spite of all her care he wasted daily before her sight, till it seemed as though the eager spirit that

looked out of his eyes, could no longer be held by so frail a tenement.

Puzzling over Hugh's thin cheeks one evening, she entered a poor cottage on her usual round of mercy. It was a sad case, of which she had been told by Hugh himself, that same day. A poor widow had died of decline, whose only son, her stay and staff, had enlisted under Blake, and had fallen in one of those sallies from the town, of which we have spoken. This lad was a great favourite of Hugh's, having at one time acted as a sort of page to the crippled boy. His ardour in the Puritan cause had indeed been kindled by his young master, and Hugh had spoken much to Edith of his early death, saying, he felt himself in a manner responsible for it, and for the desolation that his loss had brought upon the widow, and her little daughter.

"But don't you trouble about them, Edith," he had said; "you have more than enough on your hands already; I will get Master Lawrence to call on them, and see to their wants."

To-day however, with a trembling voice, he had told her of the widow's death, and had

asked her to go and see the poor orphan child, and try and comfort her.

So Edith went. She went expecting to find semi-starvation as elsewhere, prepared to find the poor woman a sacrifice to the state of siege. What then was her surprise when, on entering the tidy cottage, she found a dainty meal set out on the deal table, and Master Lawrence trying to coax the flaxen-haired child to partake of the good things thereon! Hungry herself, and knowing so much of the dire distress around her, Edith's first thought was one almost of indignation, at the goodly portion allotted to so small a child; when suddenly a new light dawned upon her. The feast spread before the little one, was the dinner she had herself carried Hugh that day; and on questioning the guilty-looking master, she found that Hugh had been thus supplying the widow and child ever since the death of the widow's son, and that he and Master Lawrence had shared the master's portion between them. No wonder Hugh's face grew more ethereal each day! nor that Master Lawrence's high cheek-bones looked more prominent than ever!

“ I would not have hindered him if I could,” he said, in answer to the mute appeal of Edith’s eyes. “ Why should not he too share in the glorious self-sacrifice ? I love him too well to deny him so great a privilege. Though I would that I could persuade him to take a larger part of my portion, which is so much beyond my needs. For it makes my heart bleed to see him droop.”

“ He will die, and it will be your fault, Master Lawrence,” sobbed Edith, unjust in her overpowering grief.

“ If he die he will die as a hero,” answered the master calmly ; “ and the glory will be all his own ; I act but as his deputy.”

Then Edith, raising her eyes to the eager, emaciated face before her, looked down again abashed, as she said almost piteously :

“ Forgive me, good Master Lawrence. I cannot be a heroine. I am not good or great enough for that. Hugh is more to me than half a hundred Parliaments !” And not trusting herself to stay longer she rushed from the cottage.

“ Only a woman after all !” said the master as he gazed at her retreating figure. “ How should she understand ?”

But as he continued his task of comforting, and feeding, the little orphan, a new tenderness stole into his voice which won the child's heart, and made her dry her own eyes in astonishment, as she fancied she saw a large drop twinkling under her big friend's eyelashes.

"Don't cry, and I'll eat my dinner," said the small maiden, falling to with good appetite in spite of her recent grief, in the happy conviction that she was thus comforting her kind big friend.

When Edith looked in half an hour later, to carry out Hugh's commission of seeing to the little orphan, a sight met her eye that softened all the bitterness out of her heart. The poor dead mother was lying as though in peaceful sleep, under a snowy coverlet on the bed. Master Lawrence was seated in a very constrained attitude on a three-legged stool, evidently afraid to move an inch lest he should waken the golden haired child, whose chubby arms were thrown around his neck, and whose flushed, tear-stained cheek, rested in sound slumber on his shoulder.

Edith stole gently forward, and disengag-

ing the clinging arms of the child, liberated the master, transferring the sleeping infant so gently to her own arms, that a deep sigh was the only sign the little one gave of half-aroused consciousness. Then, throwing a shawl over her new charge, she led the way from the cottage, beckoning to the tutor to follow her, which he did in silence, and thus they hastened through the intervening streets till they reached Gable House, and Hugh's chamber, where Edith laid her still sleeping charge at the foot of Hugh's couch.

And from that time little Polly became an inmate of Gable House, nominally under the charge of good Mistress Susan the cook, but spending a large part of her time with Master Hugh, running errands for him about the room, and helping him to pass many a weary hour, with her merry prattle and laughter. He did indeed attempt to teach her to read, but Polly's intellect was not sufficiently developed as yet, for even the rudiments of education, except that first and last education of love. But she was very happy, and very docile; everybody was so kind to her, how could she be cross? To Edith it seemed almost sad, as

she heard the child's merry laughter, to think how soon the dead mother, and the brave elder brother, were forgotten. Perhaps she was herself too young to be thankful for this light-heartedness of childhood, for surely troubles come to the little ones soon enough, and it would be the last thing their lost friends would wish, to sadden their bright young lives with pining regret.

But Edith's own heart was so heavy now with anxiety about Hugh, that any joyousness seemed to jar upon her. There was an ever-present dread which weighed on her spirit like a nightmare. Hurrying one morning into the open air, to try and gain some fresh life and hope, after a night of restless anxiety on Hugh's account, Edith found herself near the beautiful Church of St. Mary; and impulsively she entered it, seeking peace for her troubled and rebellious spirit. At first it seemed that the step she had taken served only to increase her grief. For as she knelt silently in the pew, where ever since her earliest recollections she had been wont to kneel between her father and Hugh, and as her eye rested on the well-worn Prayer-book

in which she had been wont, like a little mother and sister in one, to find out the places for Hugh, the weight at her heart grew unbearable, and hiding her face in her hands she sobbed as she had never sobbed before.

But this very outpouring of the grief she had restrained so long did her good. The stern self-repression she had imposed upon herself, had found an outlet at last; the childish tears seemed to make her a child once more; and when she was able to utter the prayer most familiar to her lips, "Our Father," the old sense of childlike trust in an all-loving Father crept into her heart, and she was comforted.

What matter though Hugh should die, and all of them share his fate; was there not a home beyond where wars and tumults would have ceased for ever?

Edith could not tell how long she had been in the church,—such a change had come over her spirit that it might have been hours; and when she came out into the bustling town again, such a change had passed over that also, that she was still further puzzled. And yet the sun had not travelled far in the sky, the

time had in truth been but short. What then had happened? Why were the worn, hungry faces, alight once more with enthusiasm? What could mean this hurrying of many feet, these shouts and this warlike din? The reaction to Edith was so great after the spiritual absorption of the last half-hour, that she felt quite dizzy and confused.

What had happened so to change the face of affairs we must relate in our next chapter.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW MASTER LAWRENCE TURNED SURGEON.

“PRITHEE tell me what has come to pass?” asked Edith eagerly, seizing on the first person she recognised, who chanced to be Master Lawrence.

“What has happened, do you ask?” said the master, his face kindling with excitement; “a miracle! no more nor less! A gallant German officer, Vandruske by name, with a body of horse, has ridden down the vales of Wiltshire, Dorset and Somerset, passing on the flank of Goring’s army at Salisbury, and has surprised Wyndham at our very gates; and breaking unexpectedly through the beleaguering lines, has ridden triumphantly into our midst! See, see!” he cried, still more eagerly, and dragging Edith with him into the midst of the crowd; “there they go again,

Vandruske with his fiery dragoons, and Blake with all the force we can spare, to follow up the panic, and drive the enemy and starvation from our gates !”

Edith, carried away with the enthusiasm of the moment, kept close to the master, devouring his wonderful news, till they were separated by the throng. She then found herself borne along by the press, without power of resistance, towards the East Gate, whence the sortie was being made. Yes, and beyond the gates too, for the excited town-folk, thus suddenly roused from a state of almost patient despair, to one of supreme triumph, could not be kept back, but followed for some distance in the wake of the gallant soldiers, who, breaking suddenly on the panic-stricken besiegers, put them to flight at the first onset, and pursued them to the very gates of Bridgwater, where at last they found shelter.

A change had, indeed, come over the aspect of affairs. But a short while since, the Parliamentary chiefs had feared that Blake must be eventually starved out, and the fairest town of the west be surrendered without

any chance of relief. And now, by the gallant dash of the brave Vandruske, and Blake's spirited sally, the besiegers were put to flight, the great roads opened for the influx of provisions, and the Roundheads under Blake, and supported by Vandruske's horse, were again able to scour the country, reviving the spirits of despondent friends, and striking terror into foes, who retired behind the ramparts of their strongholds, leaving the country open to their enemies.

But we are anticipating events, and must return to our heroine borne along in the throng, an unwilling witness of the din and tumult of the battle, and hasty rout, and of bloodshed and terror such as it had never entered into her heart to conceive. The struggle was in fact short, as the foe so quickly gave way, but it was an age in experience to Edith. It was her first glimpse of the horrid *reality* of that glorious warfare, of which she had read so much in history and romance, and whose leaders she had learned to look upon in the light of heroes. "Glorious, forsooth! Could there be anything glorious in these confused heaps of mingled dust and blood?"

in those cries of human agony? those shouts of savage triumph? Were not the victors and vanquished alike, monsters rather than heroes, in thus giving themselves up to the brutal work of destruction?"

So thought Edith, as disengaging herself at last from the throng, she leant, shuddering with horror, against a wayside shed, where some stand had apparently been made by the retreating foe, and contemplated the scene around her. Perhaps in the future, looking back upon the scene as made less real by time, she would be able to feel some respect for the high aims, and the self-devotion, which had prompted all this bloodshed, but there, standing in the midst of it, the work seemed devilish work which nothing could excuse. Not that the destruction had really been great, far from it, the resistance had been too slight; but to Edith's inexperienced eyes it was all too terrible.

Suddenly she started, and her eyes dilated with horror, as she fixed them on a writhing heap at her feet.

"Help, for the love of God!" cried a familiar voice; and in a moment Edith was on her

knees bending over a disfigured face, trying with trembling fingers to put back the blood-stained curls from the brow of her brother Marmaduke. But had it not been for the voice, and the glance of recognition in the blue eyes, she would not have discovered her gay and comely brother in the dust-begrimed heap at her feet.

The urgent need recalled her self-possession. Speaking in a calm reassuring voice to the poor lad, who was moaning with pain, she said :

“ We will take you to Gable House, my brother, and our own skilful doctor shall see to your wounds, and all will be well.”

“ No, no !” cried Marmaduke excitedly ; “ let me lie where I am and die at my post. The dastardly cowards, to fly like a flock of sheep at the first onset ! I had but just arrived with despatches, but I could not turn tail with them. And yet would that I had, ere this had happened !” he added with a shudder ; “ for, Edith, you must never let him know, but it was my good father’s hand that unconsciously laid me low.”

A dizziness came over Edith as the terrible

meaning of Marmaduke's words reached her. He must not die, it would be too dreadful; and yet what could she do? Looking around her, in an agonised search for help, she saw Master Lawrence observing her from a distance, and beckoned eagerly to him to come to her aid. In a minute he was at her side, and looking down with a mingled expression of triumph and pity on his former pupil.

"So perish all renegades!" he muttered, and then hastily set to work to relieve the fallen lad, handling him with the tenderness of a woman, and with a skill which he had acquired in a short study of surgery on the Continent. Marmaduke bore the ordeal bravely, as his wounds were probed. The right arm and the right leg proved to be much injured, and Master Lawrence doubted in his own mind whether the lad would ever be able to fight again. And there were other wounds besides, which needed careful tence, lest inflammation should set in and threaten the young life itself.

Edith and the master between them lifted their patient inside the shed, against which Edith had been leaning erewhile, and wherein

she now made a temporary couch, by collecting in a heap some fresh straw that was scattered about, and laying her own grey cloak over it. Then leaving Marmaduke in the master's care, she sped off homewards, to get the bandages, cordials, etc., that the latter needed for his patient.

It took her some time to collect the required things, and when at last she regained the shed, a cloud of dust in the distance betokened the return of the triumphant pursuers. Marmaduke had fainted with pain and exhaustion, and the master eagerly took the cordial from Edith's hand to revive him. The heavy lids unclosed again, and with an involuntary groan, the fine young fellow returned to consciousness, and to suffering. A faint smile flitted across his face as he recognised the familiar faces bending over him. He gently laid his hand on Edith's, and said in so low a tone that she had to stoop close to him to hear :

“Give my love to my father, and ask him to forgive me ; the offence has been washed out in blood.”

Edith could not answer, she only bowed

her head, and began bathing his forehead with a sponge she had brought for the purpose, while the master proceeded to bandage the broken limbs. Suddenly the patient started, and the tide of colour rushed back to his face, as the sound of the tramping of horses approached, and voices were heard as the riders passed the shed where Marmaduke lay.

“Thank God for this day’s work,” said Master Peyton to his companion, Colonel Blake.

Edith shuddered as she listened, and Marmaduke fell back upon his pallet with a curious smile on his face as he murmured :

“The great God is thanked for strange things, methinks. I at least may thank Him, for having sent me such kind friends.”

And then his eyes closed again in a sleep which was so like death, that his two watchers trembled as they bent over him ; Master Lawrence putting drops of brandy to his lips, and Edith bathing his temples with vinegar. All through the remainder of that memorable day, his life seemed to hang in the balance, and it was not till the twilight deepened that

Edith bethought her of her other duties, and of the anxiety her absence would cause those at home.

“Leave him to me, mistress,” said the tutor; “I promise not to sleep at my post, and you can come in the morning and set me free.”

“Oh! master, how good you are!” exclaimed the girl, looking up with grateful eyes into the tutor’s rugged face. “If he recover, it will be to your skill under God that we shall owe it. Such a debt too,” she added, shuddering again at the thought of her father, “as we never should be able to repay.”

“Your thanks are payment enough for me,” replied the student, with an unwonted softness in his voice, and an expression in the deep-sunk eyes that puzzled and startled his pupil, and set her thinking as she hastened back to the liberated town.

Liberated, however, but for a time; a liberation, too, which brought upon it more suffering in the future. For although supplies came in daily to gladden the hearts of the garrison and townsfolk, fugitives poured in

too, to sadden them with their tales of woe. For Goring having been baffled at Weymouth, had retired with 10,000 men into Somersetshire, and he, with his "crew," as they were called, spread horror and desolation wherever they went, not only in Somerset, but in Devon also. Alas! we need not look further than the annals of our own native land, to find atrocities sufficient to make us hide our heads in shame. Old men, women and children, ministers of religion—whose province was peace, not the sword,—fled from before this dreaded foe to the shelter of Taunton, carrying what property they could with them, and furnishing many more mouths to be fed in the dire times of scarcity that were to come.

But among these fugitives there was one who helped not a little to sustain the hearts of the townsfolk during their long trial. This was Thomas Welman, Vicar of Luppit, near Honiton in Devonshire. He had married a lady of the latter place, had been an Oxford student of learning and piety, and was much beloved in the pretty country parish where his lot had been cast. But the cruelty and

profligacy of Goring's "crew," had roused him to righteous indignation, and his denunciations of the iniquitous deeds he had witnessed as committed by the Cavaliers, in the beautiful vales of Devon, animated the spirits of the drooping Tauntonians during the hardest times of the siege.

Meanwhile our heroine's life was a busy one. Marmaduke had rallied, and had been removed by Master Lawrence to a small cottage beside the river at Bathpool, a hamlet about a mile and a half from the town, where lived a certain Dame Ursula, the old nurse of the Peynton family, who pursued the avocation of a village schoolmistress in peaceable times. The scholars did not come now, however, the country was in too unsettled a state for such small pedestrians to go abroad, so the dame was free to devote her whole attention to her first nursling, Master Marmaduke. But although the little scholars were afraid to venture forth unattended, Mistress Edith was not; or if she were, her anxiety and love for her brother outweighed her fears. Every evening as the twilight gathered she would slip on her grey cloak, and hiding her pretty

face in the depths of a large poke-bonnet borrowed from Nurse Ursula for the purpose, would hurry along the lonely old Roman causeway which was the shortest way to Bathpool, and which was entered from some upland meadows beyond the ruins of the Taunton Priory; to spend half an hour in Dame Ursula's cottage cheering the invalid. These flying visits were the sunbeams in the poor youth's monotonous life. He would ask Edith eagerly for every particular of his home, of his father, of Hugh, and of all his old acquaintances. And Edith would treasure up any little amusing incident, glad to bring the smile again to his laughter-loving eyes, now so languid and weary; keeping carefully in the background all the tale of her troubles, of Hugh's waning strength, and of the daily recurring reports of surrounding woes. Sometimes, too, she would bring him a dainty dish of her own preparing, and forget her troubles for the moment, as she watched his boyish enjoyment of the tempting repast. Sometimes Master Lawrence would join her on her homeward walk, and right glad she was when he did so. For she was but a girl after all,

though a brave one, and rarely came back alone through the dim, tree-shadowed causeway, without a feeling of thankfulness when the end was reached in safety, and the open Priory meadows gained.

But the comparative freedom of the Tauntonians was not to go on for ever, and Edith's excursions were destined to an abrupt cessation, as we shall see.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW OUR HEROINE MET WITH AN ADVENTURE.

THE importance of Blake's bold stroke in the taking and holding of Taunton, became more and more evident as time went on. It prevented the concentration of the Royalist forces, caused local jealousies, and threw discord into the King's councils. The west-country generals were indignant, that their fairest town should be allowed to remain in the hands of the rebels. And "meanwhile the New Model was perfected; and under the self-denying ordinance, the command-in-chief of the Roundhead army was transferred from Essex to Fairfax, with Cromwell for his master of the horse. Cromwell soon joined Sir William Waller; and the combined forces of the two generals making a feint as if they

would fall on Goring, the outwitted Royalists drew off to Exeter, leaving the road open for Vandrucke and his dragoons to regain the main body of Roundhead cavalry.”*

Much consultation was held at Bristol, where the Prince of Wales had summoned the Commissioners of Somersetshire to meet him, on the plans to be adopted for the subjugation of this obstinate town in the west, whence Blake by his spirited sallies disturbed the country for thirty miles around. At last it was resolved, after messages had been sent to Goring to consult with two delegates from the Prince's council, who met him at Wells, that according to his own plan, he should appear suddenly in the Vale of Taunton with a part of his army, and either capture the town or burn it to ashes, leaving meanwhile, the greater part of his horse, and 200 of his foot, on the borders of Wilts and Dorset, to observe the motions of the enemy ; but so placed as to be able to retire towards

* See Hepworth Dixon's "Life of Robert Blake," from which the historical part of our story is culled, and which we cannot recommend too highly to the perusal of our readers.

the main army, should Cromwell or Waller advance in too great force. Upon this decision orders were sent to Sir Richard Grenville to appear in the trenches before Taunton with his regiment of 800 horse, 2,200 foot, and a large body of pioneers, and cut off all communication between the town and country; orders which he zealously obeyed.

Since Wyndham had retired to Bridgwater, no enemy had been seen from the tower of St. Mary's, which Blake had used as his watch-point, nor from the turrets of the Castle; and, indeed, the winding roads of the country around, intersected with orchards, made it difficult to descry what was passing in the distance.

But the zealous Grenville soon made his approach known, and was pushing his way near to the very gates, when Goring, checked in his westward course by Waller's army, sent to recall Grenville to his aid. Grenville, however, refused to go, not only at his command, but at that of Prince Charles himself. He had promised the Commissioners, he said, not to advance beyond Taunton till he ad-

vanced through it ; and further declared that with six hundred more men, he would pledge himself to deliver the place into the Prince's hands in six days.

The Prince, perplexed between Grenville's obstinacy, and Goring's inability to fight a decisive battle without the four thousand men engaged before Taunton, consulted Prince Rupert, and it was at last agreed, that there should be a concentration of troops brought to bear upon the devoted town, which no one of the Royalist officers believed could hold out for any length of time against such combined forces.

It was a short time before this juncture, when Grenville's forces were drawing near the town, screened by the winding hedge-rows, that Edith set forth one bright March afternoon on her daily visit to Marmaduke. His recovery was making progress at last, but the months of inaction had been very irksome to him, and though he doubted the prudence of his sister's visits, he had willingly shut his eyes to the risk she ran, so precious were they to him. Hugh, on the other hand, felt acutely anxious over her, but his own inability

to help his brother, seemed to close his lips.

“I can but pray for you, Edith,” he would say, and then add with a glance of loving admiration; “but I believe angels guard you wherever you go, and that nothing evil dare come nigh my sister.”

As to her father, he was so entirely engrossed by public matters, that he was as it were lost to his family. When Edith had cautiously begun to tell him of Marmaduke's wounds and sad condition, he had checked her at once, with a sternness quite foreign to his nature.

“Let me not hear his name,” he had said; “I have but one son left me now, my poor Hugh.”

Thus thrown on her own resources, Edith had still gone on her daily errand, and though the rumoured approach of Grenville's army made her hesitate on the present occasion, the hesitation was but momentary. Marmaduke must be tended come what might; and if, indeed, the town were to be again shut up, that was all the more reason she should go this once to bid him farewell. So with a pasty,

such as the lad loved, in her basket, she hastened along the deserted old causeway, her heart beating somewhat quickly under her grey cloak, and her cheeks somewhat flushed within the depths of the poke-bonnet.

Marmaduke welcomed her warmly, and devoured the pasty with great relish. The fire was burning brightly in Dame Ursula's kitchen, for the early spring days were cold. Marmaduke sat in an arm-chair beside it, and on a stool at his feet sat Edith, her grey cloak and poke-bonnet laid aside, her flushed eager face gazing up at him, and her golden hair gleaming in the firelight. She was laughing gaily at the zest with which he was demolishing her savoury pasty, all anxious thoughts for the moment chased away. Suddenly the ripple of her laughter ceased, and with a start she rose from her seat, and going to the little uncurtained casement, gazed out into the twilight.

"I fancied a shadow fell on the window," she said; "I am getting ridiculously nervous, I fear. But you must not be surprised if I forsake you for a while, Marmaduke; the enemy

are drawing their lines nearer, and we are to be kept to strict bounds again very shortly, I am told."

"Yes, yes," answered her brother anxiously. "Selfish brute that I am! It is not fit that you should come here alone even now, my sister. Hasten back ere the dusk comes on, and do not venture here again. In a few days I shall be well enough to travel, and I am expecting a friend who will take me in charge. Now, farewell, dearest Edith; we shall meet again, if God wills, when these troublous times are past."

And drawing her face towards him, he kissed her affectionately, and himself tied on the old bonnet that made such a serviceable screen.

Hastily she donned her cloak, and with the empty basket on her arm, stepped out into the twilight. On by the river-side she walked, with a quick, light tread, that belied her elderly dress. Presently she crossed the bridge over the river, and leaving the high-road, entered the gloomy, tree-shadowed causeway, where the twilight seemed suddenly darkened to dusk. Daintily she picked her

way over the hard stones, laid down by the Romans in bygone ages. But what makes her suddenly tremble, and draw closer within the shadow of the high hedge? Is she afraid of encountering the ghosts of those ancient road-makers? Nay, it is her own foolish fancy; there is not a shadow tracking her footsteps on the other side of the road! She will say over to herself some of the texts and hymns that she loves, to reassure her heart. She would sing aloud, were it not that her voice might attract unwelcome attention. "Be strong and of a good courage," she is saying to herself, when suddenly the lurking shadow leaves the shelter of the opposite hedge, and stands before her in the way.

Edith did not scream, she stood still for a moment paralysed with fear. A vague dread of unknown horrors overpowered her, as the rumours that had reached her of the atrocities perpetrated by some of "Goring's crew" flitted through her mind. For it was no venerable Roman ghost, or wode-painted Ancient Briton, that stopped her progress, but a *bonâ fide* Cavalier who loomed before her in the twilight, with jaunty hat

and nodding plumes, the personification to her imagination of all the vices. Her heart seemed to cease beating, and she clutched at the prickly hawthorn-hedge to keep herself from falling.

“Prithee, do not faint, fair mistress; you have nought to fear from your old friend—or foe?—Percy Egerton,” said a familiar voice from under the objectionable hat.

And at once Edith felt the colour rushing back to her face, and her heart beating loudly under her grey cloak, and her self-possession restored. Angry as she was with Captain Egerton for the fright he had given her, yet all those vague fears, so much more terrible than tangible difficulties, had vanished at the first sound of the gay mocking voice.

“A thousand thanks, courteous sir,” she said, adopting his own mocking tone, “for the merry trick you have played me, in return for my father’s hospitality. By your leave, I will wish you good-evening,” essaying to pass him as she spoke.

“Not so fast, fair mistress,” replied Percy. “Bethink you that I have an old score against you, by reason of the sorry trick you played

me anent old Betty's donkey-cart. 'I said I would be even with you yet, and Cavaliers keep their word.'

"When it turns against the weak and defenceless, perchance," said Edith, her indignation getting the better of her prudence, and driving away all thought of fear. "Methinks, however, that Charles Stuart's followers should scarcely vaunt themselves on that especial virtue."

"Beshrew me, fair Puritan, but you rely too much on my goodwill!" exclaimed Percy angrily. "Had you been a man, you should have uttered such a taunt on peril of your life. Being a woman, you take a mean advantage of my powerlessness against you, to calumniate my liege Lord and King. By my troth, I have the better of you now!"

Edith's conscience acknowledged the justness of his reproof; and her nature was too true to shrink from confessing her fault.

"I did wrong so to speak," she said gently, hanging her head. "And now, craving your pardon, I would hasten on my way ere darkness overtake me."

"And since the twilight has already

deepened, and there are more of us rascally Cavaliers about, I myself will escort you ;” said Captain Egerton, with recovered good-humour.

Seeing no way of avoiding his company, Edith bowed her assent, and walked on silently, the young Cavalier keeping by her side.

At last he broke the silence.

“I am lost in admiration of my own forbearance, fair mistress,” he said. “Surely even your hard heart must be melted by it. Not only have I submitted like a lamb to be hoodwinked and outwitted ; but, even now, when my star seems in the ascendant, have I been rated pitilessly by your fair Puritan lips, without ever a glance from beneath that terrible bonnet to cheer and reassure me. Prithee, push it back a little, and let me see at least the ghost of a smile, in return for all my forbearance.”

“Is it a time to smile or jest,” replied Edith, in a tone tremulous with emotion, “when our country is rent with hate and bloodshed ; when fathers are turned against sons, and sons against fathers ; when our

homesteads are pillaged, and our people driven from them without a place wherein to lay their heads? Methinks laughter would be a sorry farce now, when our land is full of woe !”

“ And yet I saw you, erewhile, fair mistress, laughing as blithely as though there were no such thing in existence, as family discord or civil war. Yea, by my troth, a pretty picture you made, with your shining tresses gleaming in the firelight. I would gladly have exchanged places with my friend Marmaduke, to have been so tended.”

“ Ah ! then you were the shadow on the window !” exclaimed Edith. “ A pretty part to play, forsooth ; first to spy on the privacy of your friend, and then to waylay his sister thus ! Civil war must be degrading indeed, to have brought the courteous Captain Egerton to such uncourteous ways.”

“ Nay, but you anger me too far, fair Puritan !” exclaimed Percy. “ All is fair in love and war, you know ; and I love you, ingrate though you are, and insensible to my poor charms. I came not to spy upon, but to help my friend, and to arrange for his removal to more commodious quarters. It

was no fault of mine if a pretty picture caught my eye, and stayed my steps."

"Oh! can you remove him," cried Edith eagerly, "to a safe place where he will be cared for, and where he will be less desolate than in good Ursula's cottage? For that, indeed, I will thank you, and forget and forgive all the past."

"And what reward shall I have for my goodness?" asked Percy eagerly, as they issued out of the dark causeway into the open Priory meadows, through which Edith's path lay, and through which Percy dared not venture.

"The reward of a good conscience, and a sister's blessing, sir," she said.

"Not one glimpse of the severe Puritan face? Not one smile from those censorious lips?" he asked, detaining her cold little hand in his.

"We keep our smiles for heroes, not for courtiers, sir. Prithee, let me go," said Edith, trying to disengage her fingers from his grasp.

"Nay, by my troth, but so many blows deserve one kiss in return!" cried Percy,

pushing back the poke bonnet with his free hand, and imprinting a kiss on the face it concealed.

In a moment Edith had disengaged one of her own hands, and, quick as thought, had dealt him such a smart box on the ear with her supple fingers, as made the said ear tingle. Involuntarily he released his grasp of her other hand, applying his own to the insulted organ; and, before he had time to think, Edith was gone, flying across the meadows, past the old Priory, along the quiet street where St. James's fine church stood, and then turning at a right angle into North Street, and so quickly gaining her home; never resting till, with burning cheeks, she entered Hugh's quiet chamber, and sank, sobbing, on a low stool by his couch.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW BRAVELY BRAVE HEARTS BORE THEMSELVES.

HUGH, who had been restlessly anxious about Edith, brightened up at her entrance, and tenderly taking off her bonnet, and smoothing her hair with his transparent hands, said :

“ What ails you, sweet sister ? I feel that nothing can be amiss now that I have you safe again by my side. Promise me you will not venture so far alone again, the enemy are closing us in once more, and I have been in an agony of anxiety about you.”

“ Oh Hugh ! he kissed me ; he did indeed, and I could have killed him for it ! ” cried the agitated girl almost hysterically.

“ Who dared kiss my sister ? and to whom had she such murderous inclinations ? ” asked Hugh, with that cheerful rallying way of his

which always soothed Edith. "Not poor Marmaduke surely, you would not hurt a hair of his head?" he went on; "nor our good Master Lawrence, he would never so presume. I can think of none other, Edith, I give it up!"

And then she told him all the story of her adventure in the old causeway, her cheeks burning with shame all the while, and her voice choked at times by suppressed sobs. Her angry indignation was so great that Hugh sought to calm it.

"It was a sorry trick, indeed, to way-lay you in the dusk, and detain you against your will. But our gallant Captain had some excuse in the provocation you gave him, methinks. Remember how crestfallen he looked when you left him in charge of Betty's cart, and made away with the letter; and it would seem, from your own account, that even now you chided him pretty roundly. Don't let it vex you, dear sister," he said, smiling, "for, at least, you dealt him a blow for his kiss, and there the matter ends. Captain Egerton has some of the superficial follies of his class, but his heart is good; and, sooth to

say, I am not sorry that you had at least his protection on your homeward way. But you must not go again, I hear Grenville is drawing his lines closer around us, and we shall soon be imprisoned once more."

"No, I will not go again, and leave you in anxiety, my precious Hugh, I promise you. You are my chief charge now, since other succour has come to Marmaduke, for Captain Egerton is going to take him where he will be well tended. And how has the day sped with you?"

"But ill since you left, save that good Mr. Welman paid me a visit, and talked as one of the prophets of old of the glorious martyrdom in store for God's people, and of the greatness of our cause."

"Verily he has the gift of stirring up our enthusiasm," said Edith. "But, Hugh, surely they are God's people too, many of them, at least?—otherwise," she added, after a pause, "how wicked of us to send them so all unprepared to their account!"

"In truth war must be unchristian, I suppose," answered Hugh thoughtfully; "for it would not seem less evil to kill our own

brothers in the faith, would it? But a time will come," he added fervently, "when there shall be no more war or sin. That is the blessed thought to cling to,—no more suffering because no more sin."

And then the lustrous eyes that seemed already to gaze so near into eternity, closed, and the weary head leant back upon the cushions, with the pallor as of death on the face.

Just then the door opened gently, and Master Lawrence entered. Edith beckoned him to her side, and together they gazed on the worn face they both loved so well. Hugh opened his eyes again, and smiling at the tutor whispered :

"You will take care of her and let her run no risks, good master, when I am gone. I trust her to you." And then the eyes closed again in a worn-out sleep.

"Will you let me serve you as your watch-dog, Mistress Edith," said the student, with an expression of reverential entreaty in his deep-sunk grey eyes. "Or do you prefer such an escort as you had this afternoon?"

Edith blushed crimson again. Had he

then been a witness of the impertinence to which she had been subjected? But no lurking ridicule betrayed itself in his face, nought but deferential entreaty.

"I always prefer my friends to my foes, good master," she said quietly, "and should have been thankful for your escort this very day. Happily, however, Marmaduke will now be removed, and neither you nor I need risk visiting him again."

"Was it to tell you this that Captain Egerton waylaid you just now? I was at hand to help had you uttered one cry of distress. But methought that a meeting between old friends might not be unacceptable to you, perchance, and so I kept myself in the background," said Master Lawrence hurriedly, a flush mounting into his ponderous forehead.

"My friends are few," answered Edith, rather coldly, "and I was not aware that Captain Egerton ranked among them. I must leave you now with Hugh, and hasten to see after the supper. We must be stingy again if these tidings are true of the enemy's advance."

“Aye, aye, too true. Would that you and this dear lad were quit of the place,” sighed the master; “the rest of us would not matter.”

“Nay, for myself I have no fear. But oh! my kind master, help me to save Hugh, and don’t let him sacrifice himself as he did before,” entreated Edith, as she rose to go.

“I would give my life for him gladly, but I cannot prevent his being a hero if I would,” said the tutor, gazing fondly on the boy’s emaciated face. “‘Some being made perfect in a short time, fulfil a long time,’ saith Solomon; we must not grumble if it prove so with him,” added the master in a musing tone.

Edith turned away with tears in her eyes, but with a ray of comfort in her heart. She dropped her kerchief as she went out, and the wise scholar actually took it up and pressed it to his lips, with the reverence of a devotee at some saintly shrine. Truly love makes fools of us all!

Very severe were the sufferings endured by the brave people of Taunton, during the weeks that followed Edith’s adventure in the Roman

causeway. A concentration of Royalist troops was brought against the devoted town, in expectation that ten days or a fortnight, would be the utmost limit of its resistance to such overwhelming numbers. The very day on which Grenville received his allies—Wyndham, Sir John Berkeley, and Sir John Wagstaffe, with “the main body of Goring’s foot, and the whole of his great park of artillery—on that same day*” Grenville advanced his lines within musket-shot of the town, occupying the entire circuit of the suburbs; and then set out to inspect Wellington House, an outpost five miles distant, into which Blake had thrown a small garrison. From a window in this house he was marked by a musqueteer, and shot in the thigh; the wound was considered mortal, and he was immediately carried away by his servants to Exeter.

“Sir John Berkeley, who had served some weeks in the leaguer before Lyme, and was therefore supposed to know something of Blake’s tactics, succeeded to the command.”

But the six days which Grenville had

* See Hepworth Dixon’s “Robert Blake,” iii. 90, 91.

allotted for the taking of the town passed, and the task was not accomplished. Week succeeded week and still the besieged held out, although the besiegers gradually gained ground, and the investing lines were drawn closer and closer. The heroic little force at Wellington House were overpowered by numbers, and the house itself burnt by the exasperated Cavaliers. The suburbs of the town, especially East Reach—the part beyond East Gate—were pillaged and burnt, and many houses in the outer streets and lanes were battered down by the cannon. Under the shelter of ruined cottages and gardens, the besiegers now and then occupied advanced posts for a time; but still no limit but that of starvation seemed set to the duration of the siege.

These were hard times for the suffering townfolk, bravely as they bore their trials. Bread sold for one and fourpence a pound, beer at one and sixpence a quart, and other articles of food were proportionally dear. The soldier's rations were reduced to the lowest limit, and probably many of the poorer inhabitants actually died of starvation.

Berkeley had hoped to produce a great effect on the townspeople by the conflagration of Wellington House, "but Blake better understood the moral effect of such wanton barbarity, and as soon as he heard of it ordered the joy-bells of St. Mary's to ring out a merry peal."* Undoubtedly it was the religious sentiment of the people that upheld them in great measure. The fight was to a large portion of them a fight for religious liberty, and the stirring addresses of Mr. Welman did much, doubtless, to help them endure their sufferings like heroes.

Berkeley sent to Blake in his despair of taking the place by assault, inviting him to surrender to the King, rather than die the lingering death of starvation.

"Blake replied to this request, that he had not yet eaten his boots, and that he should not dream of giving up the contest while he had so excellent a dinner to fall back upon."*

It is said too that about this time, Blake, thinking a laugh might do the 'hungry garrison good, had the only animal which

* See Hepworth Dixon's "Robert Blake."

was left them, a hog nearly starved, carried to the different posts and whipped, so that the besiegers hearing its screams might think that somehow fresh supplies had been obtained. A ghastly joke it seems to us, supposing the tradition to be true, and trying to the feelings of the poor hog; but the story, whether true or not, testifies to the indomitable spirit and pluck of the Governor.

While showing such a brave front to the enemy, however, he sent urgent appeals to Parliament for succour, saying that as yet he had treated every offer of a parley with scorn, that he had still a barrel or two of powder left, and that as for food the garrison had resolved to eat their horses, but earnestly praying the Parliament to consider their distress, and in conclusion, committing "his cause to God, in the confident hope that He would relieve them in His own good time." Parliament sent promises of aid, and meantime, house by house, street by street, the town was destroyed by cannon-shot. Day by day fires raged, sometimes eight or ten houses being in flames at once, whilst in the midst of it all, "Blake and his little garrison had to

meet storming-parties of an enemy brave, exasperated, and ten times their own strength. But every inch of ground was gallantly defended. A broad belt of ruined cottages and gardens were gradually formed between the besiegers and the besieged, and over the heaps of broken walls and burnt rafters the obstinate contest was renewed from day to day.”*

But how are our special friends faring during this time of high pressure? It has been a season of rapid development with Edith. Those few weeks of suffering and self-sacrifice have brought out the depths of her character, and changed her from the bright loving girl, into the tender, sympathising, heroic woman. Hugh’s declining strength was still her sorest trial. His exhausted frame could not long hold out against the anxiety and turmoil of those terrible weeks of warfare. He never uttered one word of complaint; but Edith and Master Lawrence could see, how the continued roar of the firing tortured his sensitive nerves, how he would start at the sight of the

* For these facts see Hepworth Dixon’s “Robert Blake.”

sudden illuminations thrown over the scene, by many a blazing house and cottage, when wrapped in flames from the fire-arrows and hand-grenades of the enemy. All day he would watch the streets from his couch in the bow-window, often motionless for hours, with that unearthly light of enthusiasm and sympathy in his eyes, that seemed to Edith like the loving look of an angel.

"Hugh," she said one day, when he had been lying perfectly still for a long time, "don't you weary of lying there? The sights are but sad ones that greet you."

"No, I am not weary, I have no time for that," he answered, glancing at his sister for a moment, and then added in a lower tone: "I cannot fight, so I pray instead; and I like to watch all that pass by, and try and guess their needs, that I may remember them all in my prayers. Oh! Edith, I love them all so much; and though their hungry eyes haunt me, yet I thank God every day for giving them such brave hearts. See, there goes poor old Betty Coles; she has fallen, she can carry the burden of her life no longer. Go down to

her, sweet sister, and bring her in if but to die."

Edith went down, and poor old Betty was brought in and ministered to; but Hugh was right, the ebb of her life was too far gone ever to return on this side the grave, and the rosy-cheeked vegetable-seller, who had been so gallantly helped by Percy Egerton but a few months since, now breathed her last in Edith's arms.

CHAPTER X.

HOW EDITH SEARCHED IN THE GARDEN
OF DEATH.

BUT scenes of death were familiar to Edith now. Not even Hugh knew what she went through during those terrible weeks, how many sufferers she had relieved by denying herself almost the necessary food for subsistence, nor how many death-beds she had helped to soothe and comfort. Not only in poor cottages, within fire of the besiegers, had she prayed by the side of the dying, but even amidst those heaps of ruins, over which the fighting daily went on, would she flit to and fro in the dusk, clad in Marmaduke's old riding-cloak, and with a hat of his slouched over her forehead, to seek out the wounded and dying, and minister to their wants. On these latter expeditions Master Lawrence was

her usual attendant, both to aid her with his surgical skill, and to keep a guard over her. It was no time for personal thoughts, or Edith would have shrunk from his unwearied devotion, startled as she had been more than once by the manner of her old tutor towards herself. But at such a time; when but one heart seemed to beat in the devoted town, it would have appeared to her strangely out of place to think of private feelings.

Even the indignation and shame which would take possession of her still at times when she thought of Percy Egerton, she thrust aside with a severe self-rebuke, for allowing such memories to disturb her in the midst of the deep trouble all around. And yet it was strange how this feeling haunted her. "Surely," she thought to herself, "I must have said or done something wrong, spoken rudely, flightily, perhaps, ere such a polished gentleman as Captain Egerton could have treated me so lightly?"

And the pale cheeks would flush still at the thought of it, and the blue eyes would lose their customary expression of sad resignation, for one of momentary anger and excitement.

at the recollection. Poor Betty Coles brought it all vividly before her again. How long ago it seemed, surely years, not months only, since the over-turning of Betty's cart, and Captain Egerton's discomfiture.

Just as Edith was tenderly laying down her lifeless burden with tears of compassion in her eyes, a man's step was heard in the passage, and the rare appearance of her father greeted her. She looked up at him with her tears still unshed, and was startled by the haggard expression of his face. Master Peynton was a red-hot zealot, and had developed into one of the Ironsides stamp of soldiers to whom Cromwell owed so much. His whole soul seemed possessed with indignation against the oppressor, and an uncompromising demand for the rights of freedom. He rejoiced in the privations which he and his fellow-townfolk had to endure, even Hugh's failing health, and Edith's loss of bloom, he bore unflinchingly, for were they not too partners with him, and with all the brave sufferers, in this glorious martyrdom for liberty? Thus Edith was the more startled at the unusual disturbance of his

countenance, and looked at him anxiously. He was the first to speak.

“Waste no idle tears, my daughter, over the happy fate of that aged martyr. She has borne her part bravely, and has entered into her rest. What happier lot could any of us hope for? God grant we may all have consciences light as hers, when our turn comes.”

So saying, he turned aside into his study, where Edith heard him sink on a chair with a suppressed groan. Thoroughly alarmed, she left poor Betty's lifeless body in the care of other hands, and gently entering the library, came and stood beside her father, and laying her hand on his bowed head, asked softly :

“Father, what ails you?”

“I am at war with my conscience, child, and that is a harder warfare tenfold than any other. My path was not clear before me, and may be I followed my evil passions rather than the calm dictates of duty. The devil tempts us in divers manners, perchance it was he that directed my blow against the defenceless head.”

"Whose head, my father?" asked Edith in an awed whisper; it was so strange to hear her reserved father speak thus.

"The head of the lad, Percy Egerton, my whilom guest, and the only son of thy mother's early friend," replied her father sternly. "Not," he added, "that such soft sentiments as these could have weighed in the scale with duty, but the lad was a brave lad, and was foremost in the fray, and my life was in his hand, but when he saw who I was, child, he dropped his weapon, and I raised mine and he fell. Say, Edith, was it a cowardly deed, an impulse from the evil one, or was it the stern voice of duty, bidding me spare not, even had it been mine own son?"

He looked up at her eagerly as he asked the question, apparently placing his justification in her hands. But there was no answer in her face of good or ill, for she had tottered back at his words, and lay insensible at his feet.

How long she lay there Edith never knew. She recovered her senses at last lying on a bed in her own room, and found her old nurse Ursula leaning over her.

“Thank God, my bonny bairn, that you have come to, at last !” exclaimed the faithful soul. “I happened to call in just in the nick o’ time, for the master were most beside hisself. But I told him it was but a bit of old Ursula’s nursing you needed, and a sup of something good to eat, so here it is, my honey, and you’ll eat and drink a bit like a good child, as old Ursula bids you.”


Thus she went on crooning over her, till Edith’s thoughts gradually sorted themselves, and the terrible tidings that had caused her faint came back to her mind. Filled with a firm resolve, she aroused herself, and delighted Ursula by eagerly devouring the food she had brought her, and of which she had in truth stood in dire need. Then throwing her arms with a burst of child-like affection around Ursula’s neck, she said :

“I am going out to seek some one amid the heaps of this day’s slain, Ursula; will you come too? No one will hurt us, I have often been before.”

In vain Ursula expostulated, “It was dusk, there would be ill folks about; it was no right work for the like of her,” etc. ; Edith was

determined, and arose, strengthened by her food, and began to don her disguise. Ursula watched in silence awhile, and then murmuring to herself, "The bairn had ever a will of her own, and if she must go, it's no old Ursula that will let her go alone," put on her old poke bonnet and shawl, and hobbled after her nursling down the stairs, and out into the quiet street.

The young moon was shining calmly down on the devoted town, as Edith, followed by her faithful nurse, passed along Fore Street and East Street, in the deepening twilight. They had not far to go; the enemy's lines were drawing ever nearer, and the scene of the obstinate fighting, which had been going on that very day, was an old-fashioned garden on one side of East Reach. A garden well known to Edith in happier times, when she and her brothers had been wont to visit the old ladies to whom it belonged, and to think its formal parterres of flowers, and its statues and fountains, a very paradise of grandeur. The walls were battered down now by the enemy's cannon, and the old ladies' house left in ruins. But some of the statues, and the



water-nymphs from whence the fountains had been wont to play, still stood intact, looking down in cold indifference on the terrible scene around them, on the up-turned faces of the dead and dying who lay there on the crushed flower-beds, as helpless as those flowers themselves, and as gay erewhile as they! An involuntary shudder passed through Edith as she entered the fatal enclosure, and Ursula fairly gave way.

“I can’t do it, Miss Edith ; I can’t go on. It’s more like ghost-land than aught else, and I daren’t go no further, indeed I daren’t, my dearie.”

“You are right, Ursula, it is too much for you,” answered Edith, looking anxiously at the pale, trembling, old woman ; “go back and prepare a bed in the small parlour, and get a doctor and all things ready. Meantime I must seek my patient ere it be too late. See, I do not tremble, I have no fear. God will take care of your nursling, Ursula ; come, you must let me go.”

For the old woman had seized Edith’s arm, and was entreating her, with tears trickling down her furrowed face, not to venture into

“so awesome a place.” But Edith gently shook her off, and stepped across the battered-down wall, over the possession of which so many lives had been lost.

She was not alone in her search. As pitiful well-nigh as the prostrate forms strewn on the ground, were the eager, anxious faces of the seekers. Mothers searching for their sons, comrades for their fellows, and, most pitiful of all, some quite children in years, but with the anxiety of little men and women in their faces, going hand-in-hand seeking the missing father who had been the mainstay of their young lives. Edith's heart sickened, but there was no room for selfish horror in this dread fellowship of woe. She held out her hand to a pale thin lad of about ten years of age, who was leading a still younger sister by the hand, and asked him whom he sought.

“It's just daddy we want,” said the boy. “He went out with the Colonel this morning and has never come back, and there's ne'er a bit nor a sup of aught in the house. And Nellie, here, she's been a-crying after her dad, so I thought I'd better bring her along with me.”

Here Nellie began to cry again, stammering out between her sobs :

“Nellie is frightened, Nellie wants to go home.”

“You had better take her back, my boy,” said Edith, her own voice tremulous with sorrow ; “I know your father; he is good John Thomas, the clerk at St. Mary’s; I will send you word when he is found. And stay,—you had better go to Gable House, and say Mistress Peynton sent you there to get some supper, and to wait till she came back.”

The boy looked wistfully into the garden of death, and then tenderly down on his little sister, and choking his sobs, turned to go, only saying as he did so :

“Will you tell father, when you find him, please ma’am, as how we came out to seek him ?”

Edith promised, and then with a strange calmness that puzzled her, went on her way. On every hand objects of pity met her view, but others were busy attending to their wants, and so she hurried on. Eagerly she passed from one group to another, in the vague hope that the person she sought might be the centre

of it, to be again and again disappointed. A name arrested her at one spot.

“Poor Thomas !” she heard a soldier say ; “there’ll be no more droning of responses for him, till he sings them, maybe, in heaven.”

“Aye, aye,” answered another ; “he’s at his last gasp, poor chap ; but maybe he’ll have a sweeter voice there to sing them with. He was always a God-fearing sort o’ a man, and like a mother to his motherless children ; nobbut his voice was a bit cracked and droning-like.”

Hearing these remarks Edith drew near the dying clerk to deliver his boy’s message, if, indeed, he were still able to receive it. The poor man was lying exhausted in the arms of one of the speakers, when Edith came up, and kneeling down beside him, said in her clear voice :

“Your little lad and Nellie have been here seeking for you, Thomas, but Nellie was frightened and crying, so I sent them away to my home, and promised the brave boy to tell you he had come to seek you, when I should see you.”

“Thank you, mistress, you will be good

to the children I know ; tell them they must look to their Heavenly Father ; I am going home ;” gasped out the dying man, and then all was still, and one more soul had sped from that Garden of Death to the Gates of Life beyond.

The two soldiers gazed after our heroine as she rose from her knees, and resumed her search.

“ It’s a lady, I’ll be bound, for all her man’s cloaking,” said one of them.

“ It’s Mistress Peynton herself, God bless her !” said the other. “ Let’s follow her, comrade ; she’ll be wanting help, I guess, in the errand she’s come on.”

Meantime Edith had gone a little way apart into the more lonely portion of the garden, with a fresh hope that had just sprung up in her heart.

“ He would have dragged himself away, perchance, from the din and turmoil to die in peace,” she said to herself. And with this thought, pursued her way, peering under every shrub, and into every dark corner, until she came to one of the statues gleaming coldly white in the moonlight, beside a tall

cypress-tree. There she suddenly halted, with a face as white as the marble one above her, and gazed with eyes dilated with horror on the greensward at her feet.

Lying still in the moonlight, his cavalier hat crushed beneath his head, and his long dark curls hanging dishevelled across his face, so handsome still in its unconsciousness, and with the impress of a smile yet lingering on its lips, was the form of Percy Egerton.

So coldly calm, so unearthly still he looked as Edith gazed on him, that the horrible conviction which she had never let come nigh her till now, that he was absolutely slain by her father's hand, past all hope of recovery, overwhelmed her, and with the bitter heart-piercing cry—"He is dead, he is dead!" she fell on her knees beside him, and bowing her head on her hands sobbed convulsively.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW TWO VIGILS WERE KEPT IN GABLE HOUSE.

EDITH'S piteous cry hurried the steps of the soldiers who had been following her; but ere they could reach her, some one else had come forth from the shadow and was proffering his aid. This was Master Lawrence, Captain Lawrence as he was now called, being one of Blake's most trusted officers. He was on night duty, and had seen the cloaked figure flit across the moonlight, from his station on the garden wall; and ere he had had time to conjecture what could have moved his pupil to so fearful a ramble, that bitter cry pierced his ears and his heart at once, and brought him by a few hasty strides to her side, and to that of his prostrate rival. With a face as white as her own he knelt

beside the lifeless form, and after listening at the heart, and touching the cold lips, said in a voice that sounded muffled and strange, both to himself and to her who heard him :

“Thank God ! he is not dead, mistress, not yet, at least ;” and then he added in a lower tone, which haunted Edith for many a day : “Would God it had been I instead of him !”

Just then the soldiers came up, and Captain Lawrence ordered them to lift the body and carry it to his own quarters. One of the soldiers grumbled a little, on recognising the young leader of the day’s fierce onslaught.

“Surely, Captain,” he urged, rather sullenly ; “we have enough of our own brave fellows to care for, without wasting our time on this happily fallen foe. If it had not been for Captain Peynton’s brave arm, he might have robbed us of this ground itself, as well as of the corpses that fill it.”

On hearing these words Edith recovered herself in a moment, and, throwing off her cloak, said, with an air of imperiousness unusual to her :

“You know not what you say, fellow. Take up this gallant gentleman, and bear him

to my father's house. Master Peynton would give his own right arm to save Captain Egerton's life. Our house is prepared to receive him ; I go myself to announce your approach."

So saying, she turned from them, and with a step as firm and stately as though her nerves had sustained no shock, she led the way back over the broken wall, and along the moonlit streets, till she was met by Ursula and the doctor, at the door of Gable House, where she stood aside to let the soldiers pass in with their burden. She even waited till they came out again to give them money, and to send them into the kitchen for some supper, despatching Ursula at the same time to see after the two little orphans she had sent thither, bidding her break to them gently the news of their father's death ; and then, with an appearance of perfect composure, she went into the parlour to hear the doctor's sentence and to receive his orders.

It is strange how in times of high pressure, even the most sensitive among us seem gifted often with a calmness that surprises even ourselves. Is it that self is at the root

of a good many of our doubts and fears, and that the very fact of being wholly engrossed in the welfare of another, gives us a power beyond our ordinary experience, and banishes all lesser fears?

Edith did not blench as she stood there helping the surgeon, as he cut away the clotted love-locks from the young Cavalier's brow, and discovered a fearful gash across the temple and cheek. She stood ready with her sponge, to aid him in finding out the extent of the mischief, and threaded the needle herself with which he sewed up the terrible wound.

The doctor said afterwards that he had seldom seen such nerve in a woman, and that, with such a nurse at hand, he would not shrink from the most trying campaign.

Edith asked no questions, she waited to hear the sentence when the work was done, and at last the doctor spoke.

"It is an ugly case," he said; "there has been great loss of blood from this terrible sword-cut, and some concussion of the brain besides; God only knows the issue. Meantime, humanly speaking, all depends upon the

patient being kept perfectly quiet when consciousness returns, as I trust it will. You must not allow him to speak or move; tell him at once that his life depends on it. Be as firm and calm yourself as you are now. Remember his recovery, under God, is in your hands."

"But what if the mere sight of me excite him, doctor? We have met before," said Edith, with rising colour. "If you think an entire stranger would be a safer nurse, I am ready to give up my place."

The doctor pondered a moment, then said, decisively, to Edith's great relief:

"No, I will trust you. If you have influence with my patient, use it calmly and firmly for his good."

Then, after minute directions as to the course of treatment to be adopted, he left Edith to her solitary watch, promising to come again early in the morning, and to instruct old Ursula to be within call meantime, in case she were wanted.

And so the long hours of that longest night in her life passed slowly for our heroine in that darkened chamber, lit by a solitary

lamp, whose faint light fell upon Edith's upraised face as she knelt by the couch, alternately wrestling in prayer for the salvation of him who lay thereon, whether in life or in death; and watching, with the sickness of hope deferred, for one sign of returning consciousness on that chiselled marble face.

The first pale streaks of dawn were stealing into the silent chamber, when at last Percy Egerton's heavy lids unclosed, and the reviving spirit of consciousness looked out dreamily from his dark eyes. There was no startled surprise in those reopened windows of the soul. As he told Edith afterwards, it seemed to him as though he were already in some blissful place of rest, far removed from the turmoil of the world, when his awakening glance rested on her kneeling figure, and the holy, rapt expression of her upraised face.

He had not stirred as yet, and she, still deeming him unconscious, and with her hope well-nigh exhausted by long expectancy, had been praying for resignation, and was in the act of saying those most difficult words, "Thy

will be done," when the long-sealed eyes unclosed, and rested in that crisis on the calming vision of her heaven-lit face. The perfect stillness too of the place, save for the gentle twittering of awakening birds in the garden ; the soft rosy light creeping into the room, and shaming the dull flicker of the lamp that still burnt on ; the familiar oak-panelled walls of the parlour, where he had been wont to sit during his former residence here ; all tended to soothe the invalid, and to smooth his passage back into life.

Many minutes had elapsed ere a gentle sigh aroused Edith from her devotions, with a quick throb of her heart which she hastened to still, and caused her to turn her eyes eagerly on her patient. And as they turned, an intense joy and thankfulness took possession of her, for there was no wild terror in the dark eyes that met hers, only a restful calm ; while a happy smile, as of a child awakening from a long slumber, seemed to hover on the lips.

"Thank God!" she ejaculated, in a hushed voice, and then arose quietly, and taking the cordial left by the doctor for the purpose,

gently raised her patient's head and put it to his lips. He drank it eagerly, and then his head fell heavily back on her arm, and he was won in a quiet sleep. She would not move or speak, lest she should break the spell of that blessed slumber. And though her arm ached with the heavy weight upon it, and though she was ready to sink with weariness from standing so long in one position, yet it was thus the doctor found her, when an hour later he entered with an anxious face, fearing the worst from the long silence of the sick-room.

"An awesome still night" it had been, old Ursula had told him, and many a time since dawn she had listened at the door, and longed to enter and comfort her nursling, but dared not, the doctor's orders had been so strict. "And yet," she added, "to think of the poor lamb watching alone in the chamber of death, was a'most more nor I could bear."

So the doctor had entered with a grave face, which suddenly brightened as his eyes rested on the peaceful slumberer, and his ears caught his regular breathings. His

first care was for Edith, whom he handed over into Ursula's charge, bidding her have some breakfast, like a good child, and then go to bed and sleep as long as she could. Edith obeyed without a murmur, the reassuring words—"He will do now, you may leave him safely to other hands," were enough; and utterly worn out in body, but with a deep content at her heart, she betook herself straight to her chamber, and after tasting a little food, threw herself dressed as she was on her bed, and slept the sleep of a child.

It was twilight again when she awoke, not the twilight of dawn but of dusk, and in the dim light she saw her father standing by her bedside. The unwonted apparition startled her.

"Father, is it Hugh?" she exclaimed; "is he worse?"

The strong man could not speak, he bowed his stern head upon the pillow, and his whole body was shaken with sobs. Edith aroused herself, and put aside her own grief to soothe her father's. She knew that the dreaded blow had fallen, that the young life, so

precious to her, had come to its earthly close, but her father's despair nerved her to exertion. She tried to soften his anguish, by telling him how Hugh had looked forward to death as a glorious deliverance. How his time had been spent for months past, in praying for himself and for others. What faith and hope he had. How often he had expected each night would be his last, and how calmly he had awaited his release. All this and much more she told him, words that were sacred to her, and that she could not have uttered but to soothe the extremity of her father's woe. But all seemed only to add to the bitterness of his grief. At last, in her perplexity, she said half-shyly :

“Father, shall we kneel down and pray for strength to bear it?”

Then the bitter self-upbraidings burst forth.

“No, no, child, I dare not pray. I have brought it all on myself. It is I who have destroyed my boy. His life was a forfeit for another's, the one you wot of. It is my punishment for smiting in my fury the defenceless head, and my punishment is greater than I can bear! Nay, stop me not. Do

not try to palliate my sin. I have tried to do that myself, but my self-excusing were but lies. What if the war be just? What if we fight for our liberty and our faith? If we use our liberty to do dastardly deeds, and make our religion the excuse for our fury, will the greatness of our cause avail us aught? All the past night as I sat by Hugh's couch, and listened to his heavenly words, my heart struggled against the dawning light. I heard him pray that there might speedily be peace, that the defenders of liberty might not be misled by their passions, to do deeds of violence under the name of right. I heard him pray for Robert Blake, that his conscience might be kept alert; and for General Cromwell that his zeal might not blind him; for the King, that he might see his duty and do it, and be restored to his rightful place; and that the civil war between brothers might cease, and the rights of religion and the people be maintained by peaceable measures. Then Edith, he prayed for me, that I might forgive Marmaduke, and find comfort in him when he himself was gone. For Marmaduke, too, he prayed

earnestly ; and for you, child, with tears that seemed tears of joy. Then he turned to Master Lawrence, who was keeping vigil with me beside him, and said some low words to him. The master's frame shook, and I saw that even he wept, I had not guessed he loved our boy so well. And then I could bear it no longer, and I went out into the passage to hide my grief. Presently Master Lawrence called me, for the lad was well-nigh gone. I bent over him, and he gave me a kiss for you, my child ; the master had told him, he said, how you were occupied, and he would not have you disturbed, but I was to bid you good-bye. I started up to fetch you, but he motioned me to stay, and in a few moments, with a heavenly smile on his face that reminded me of his sainted mother, he passed away."

The father paused, overcome with emotion. Then he suddenly spoke again in the bitter tone he had used at first :

"He is gone and I never shall rejoin him, for my hand is the hand of a murderer, and the curse of Cain is upon me. The blood of Percy Egerton crieth from the ground."

So awful was the tone of hopelessness in which he uttered his own doom, that Edith was frightened by it. She hardly dared speak for a moment, then she crept close to him, and throwing her arms around him, exclaimed through her tears :

“Father, father, be comforted ; he is not dead. He too this night has been near the brink of the river, but God has restored him. He lives, and sleeps the sleep of recovery in the parlour below. Oh ! father, let us thank God for our precious Hugh, and for him.”

We will leave the father and daughter on their knees in that upper chamber. Such scenes are too sacred for strangers' eyes, they rejoice the hearts of the angels.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW A VIRGIN FORTRESS WAS TAKEN BY
STORM WHILE THE BATTLE RAGED.

FROM that day the stern cloak of reserve, in which Master Peynton had shrouded his grief ever since Marmaduke's flight, was thrown off. He and Edith were more than ever to each other, and without abating one jot of his zealous self-devotion to the cause of liberty, there was a gentleness in his tone and bearing toward those who differed from him, which gained him the reproach of half-heartedness, from the most virulent of his companions in arms. But for the time he had to put aside all indulgence in his grief, for the crisis of the siege was fast approaching.

The Prince of Wales had left Bristol for Bridgwater to be nearer the scene of action,* and there a council of war was held, and it

* See Hepworth Dixon's "Robert Blake."

was resolved to raise an additional 8000 men in those parts, and to bring the whole Royalist force in the west to bear upon Taunton, which it was considered *must*, for want of bread, fall within a month. But still Taunton held on.

Meanwhile Cromwell was raising and organising his famous army of Ironsides, and when this army was ready to take the field, opinions were divided as to its direction. Cromwell himself was for marching towards Oxford, where the King lay, and fighting a decisive battle. But there was a strong insistance on the other side that the issue of such a battle would be uncertain, that Taunton was the key to the western counties, and that its fall after so brave a resistance would discourage the Roundheads. And, moreover, that it deserved the first relief after all that it had endured.

So the word for Taunton was given, and the soldiers joyfully started. So great was their enthusiasm, that for a week they refused to take an hour's repose, and were already among the Cavalier tents in Dorsetshire before the Royalist generals had heard

of their departure from London. But at Blandford two expresses overtook them counter-ordering the main body to march upon Oxford, which place the King had left with but a small garrison in order to join Prince Rupert in the north. A small relief party only was ordered to proceed to Taunton.

Fairfax obeyed the orders, first detaching Colonel Welden with four regiments for Taunton, and bidding him gather all the recruits he could on his way, and to let Blake know of his coming. Six companies of foot joined him at Dorchester, and every town through which he passed furnished fresh levies. Welden passed over the hill of Castle Neroche at the head of 2000 horse, and 3000 foot, to encounter an army three times his strength. And there we will leave him for the present, and return within the devoted town.

It was the 10th of May, but little of the joyousness of spring was to be seen in the faces of the half-starved townfolk, only a patient waiting and expectancy in some, and a resigned despair in others. Among the

first set was the brave Governor. His very voice inspired confidence wherever it was heard, and the calm of his countenance was as a refuge for the despondent. He had been often at Gable House of late trying to comfort the mourners, and sharing in their grief at the loss of his young admirer. Hugh's fragile body had been laid at rest in St. Mary's churchyard a week ago, and many had been the poor pensioners, for whom he had denied himself the nourishment necessary to support his weak constitution, who had clustered with tears and blessings around his grave. Little Polly, the orphan, had been there overwhelmed with childish sorrow, and the two other orphan dependents of Gable House had stood by in awed silence, with their own great grief so fresh in their minds. The care of these little ones had been some solace to Edith, in the first dread hours of loneliness and bereavement.

Percy Egerton still lay in the oak-panelled parlour, under the care of Nurse Ursula. Edith had not seen him since that first night's watch. In truth her brave heart had given way at last, and she had felt as though

she would have liked to lie down by Hugh in his grave, for utter weariness and sorrow. She persevered, however, in her usual work; but went about with such listless, lagging steps, that the kindly people said to one another as she passed them in the streets, that it made their hearts sad to see the fairest maiden in the Deane, waning into such a shadow.

As she was wending her way on this 10th of May towards St. Mary's Church, to seek the comfort which so many sufferers received there at this time, from the eloquent lips of Mr. Welman, she was arrested by seeing a crowd collected in the church square. All eyes were eagerly upturned to the watch on the top of the tower, who were signalling to the Governor that a large body of cavalry were approaching the Royalist lines from the Chard road, as if to attack them. An eager murmur ran through the crowd of "Rescue, rescue!" but the Governor, striding through their midst, himself ascended the tower, and stood calmly watching the manoeuvres. Edith's listlessness vanished at once. Seeing her father follow the Colonel, she too ascended

the tower, and there in breathless silence they watched. The attacking party came on enveloped in clouds of dust, and as they drew near Berkeley's tents, the Cavaliers turned out to engage them. A fierce battle seemed to wage for a time, and then the attacking party wavered and fled. A groan escaped from Edith, and from other of the by-standers on the tower, but the Governor turned to them with a smile as he said :

“ It was but a ruse to draw us forth, my friends, but the ruse has failed. Patience yet awhile ; succour is nigh at hand.”

The truth of the Governor's conclusion was soon apparent. Berkeley, seeing that his ruse had failed to draw Blake forth from his stronghold, recalled his flying squadrons, and forming them in deep columns, rushed to the assault of the ruins that separated besiegers from besieged.

Blake had lost no time, but was found calmly awaiting their attack, and offered a passive resistance to the eager charge of the enemy. Never had the Royalists fought more bravely. Edith still keeping her watch on the tower, fascinated by the intense

interest of the scene, could not but admire the desperate courage, with which the Cavaliers rushed upon their impenetrable foe. Perchance the thought of Percy Egerton thus rushing on her father's sword, gave the besiegers an interest in her heart, which her patriotism might else have begrudged them. But still warmer was her enthusiastic admiration for the brave and determined resistance of the half-starved garrison. She fancied she could descry her father by the Colonel's side, and surely that ungainly figure in the very forefront of danger, could be none other than Master Lawrence himself. Hand-grenades were flung by the enemy in among the houses, in such quantities that two streets were reduced to ashes. Pike in hand the Cavaliers cleared the outworks, passed the East Gate, and stormed the slight wooden barricade in East Street. And now the fighting having drawn too near, for Edith to descry any more of it from the tower, she descended with beating heart, and hurrying along through the excited streets, with the horrid din of battle filling the air, quickly reached her own home.

It was there that she would await the catastrophe, be it what it might ; and as far as human eye could see, all seemed to foretell the very worst. Just as our heroine reached Gable House, the besieged were falling back before the foe, and anxious, spell-bound groups of women and children stood about in hushed expectation of horrors to come. But Blake had but fallen back to concentrate his strength, and recruit his stock of powder, and he now gave the word of command for the reserve force which was drawn up in the Bull-ring, to advance at a pike-charge. In a moment there was the quick regular tread of many feet in the road, as the reserve pushed forward to death or victory, and at the same time a heavy musketry fire opened out on the besiegers from behind the houses in East Street, where the musketeers had been stationed ; and the din was deafening.

Edith hurried up to Hugh's chamber, which she had not entered before since his body had been carried away from it, and throwing open the window stepped half out on the leads without, from whence the rear of the besieged force could be seen, and by

its swayings to and fro, give some notion of how the fight itself was raging. An awful time it was! The blazing houses, the continuous roar of the musketry, the clash of arms, the groans, and the shouts of triumph, as one side or the other gained, or lost, caused a fever of excitement in Edith which kindled her eye, and flushed her cheek, and made her feel that she was living more intensely than she had ever lived before.

As she stood thus rapt, one hand holding firmly by the window, her head bent forward, her hat thrown off in the eagerness to see, and her eyes dilated with excitement, some one entered the room at the open door unperceived, and throwing himself exhausted on Hugh's forsaken couch, watched her, as she watched the conflict.

"Thank God, they waver!" she exclaimed at last. Then after a long interval, "They retire, the firing lessens, for this time we are spared; but alas! alas! for the dead and the dying, the groans and the agony! Oh merciful God, have mercy on them all!"

And withdrawing from her perilous position,

and cowering down on the floor within the window recess, she hid her face in her hands, and for the first time since the day of Hugh's death, wept abundantly.

A sound as of a suppressed sigh from Hugh's couch startled her, when the first violence of her weeping was over, and hardly knowing what she expected to see, whether even Hugh himself—anything seeming possible in her excited state—she turned her eyes towards the place whence the sound came.

A cry escaped her as she did so, for the form that met her gaze, though not Hugh's, was almost as spectre-like an one as her heated imagination could have conjured up. In the hollow cheeks and emaciated frame that lay there, it was difficult to recognise the whilom gay and handsome Cavalier, Percy Egerton; or even the unconscious invalid, by whom she had kept that memorable night-watch only ten days since! Ten days of wasting fever had made sad havoc with his young vigour and beauty, and although the fever-light had now gone from his eyes, and the hectic flush from his cheeks,

they had left in their stead a prostration which it was pitiful to see.

At the sound of her cry, a faint tinge of colour came into his hollow cheeks, as he said, holding out a well-nigh transparent hand :

“Forgive me, fair mistress, for startling you thus. I could not rest below while the battle was raging, and, having reached this resting-place, I had no further power to move, otherwise I would not have remained to intrude on your sorrow.”

Edith did not speak. She only stood gazing at him, the excitement on her countenance giving place to an almost childlike pleading, as she looked anxiously into the poor, pale face.

“What will you?” asked Percy, with a ghost of his old merry smile. “It were impossible to withstand any request from those beseeching eyes. Only speak to me, that I may know you are veritable flesh and blood, and not a real angel as I deemed you when last we met.”

“Oh! *you* must not die too, it is more than I can bear!” exclaimed Edith at last, the extremity of her fear breaking down all her

proud reserve for the moment ; but only to overwhelm her with shame and confusion, as soon as the words had passed her lips.

Percy Egerton raised himself on the couch, and grasped her dress with trembling fingers as she would have fled past him, and exclaimed in a voice shaken with emotion, while colour returned to his cheeks, and love-light shone in his eyes :

“ Stay with me, dearest, if you would not have me die. Say but that you love me ever so little in return for my devotion, and life will return with your love. Yes, I feel it even now ; my heart is stirred, the current of life already flows more eagerly. Oh ! Edith, my good angel, my preserver, finish your work. Leave me not the thankless boon of life without love. More welcome death a thousand times than such a dark existence.”

But still Edith stood irresolute, with averted face, struggling to stifle her emotion, and to recall her wonted self-possession. At last, without venturing to turn her head, she said :

“ This is no time to talk of our own selfish

feelings, while life and death are struggling for the mastery around us ; and in this chamber, too, so lately made desolate."

And at this thought, sobs choked her utterance.

"Nay," answered Percy, in a low tone of such deep feeling as surprised Edith with its earnestness. "Were our love a light matter I should deserve your rebuke. But my love for you is dearer to me than life, and as sacred as the memory of the sainted Hugh himself. Such love can but strengthen us to do, and to bear. Oh ! Edith, if death should indeed part us, would it not be a comfort to have looked into each other's souls before the separation came ?"

At this plea all Edith's resistance gave way, she turned her head, their eyes met, and there was no more need for words.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW THE CAVALIER WENT HIS WAY,
LEAVING A TOKEN BEHIND HIM.

IN spite of all the confusion, and the tramping in the street below, in spite of the impending possibilities of the morrow, I fear that Percy and Edith were for a short time in a state of elysium so complete, that a hand-grenade exploding in the room itself would hardly have troubled them. Their souls had met, and recognised each other; what were all sublunary matters after that?

But we must forgive them. There comes but one such first awakening to love's young dream; and to Edith, at least, the awakening had come as so complete a surprise and revelation, that the novel sensations well-nigh bewildered her.


That this young Cavalier, who had so often

provoked her hostility, who had drawn away Marmaduke, and fought against the liberties of the nation, should suddenly have become all the world to her, was a fact too astounding to be easily received. But a fact nevertheless it was, and a very stubborn fact, too, as the sequel proved; although, perchance, the suddenness of it was not in reality so great as was the awakening thereto.

The oblivion to all else lasted, however, but for a short time, and Percy was pleading eagerly his joy at having met her again, in excuse for his offence on that memorable evening in the Priory meadows, when the lovers were startled by the heavy tread of burden-bearers in the street below, which ceased at Gable House.

“My father!” cried Edith, hurrying to the window with blanched cheeks.

But no; it was not Master Peynton; he stood erect at the head of the bearers, and the wounded soldier who lay on the litter was none other than he whom Edith had seen in the forefront of the battle that day, her old tutor, Master Lawrence. He had courted death, had he indeed found it?



“Bear him to my boy’s chamber, it is his own desire ; Ursula, show them the way,” she heard her father say in a voice of command, as the sad procession entered the house.

There was not a moment to lose ; as soon as the words were uttered, Edith was at Egerton’s side again.

“Can you rise with my help,” she said, “and reach the next room ? Master Lawrence is being brought here sadly hurt, and the sight of you might do him harm. Quick, they come.”

And without waiting to answer the surprised questioning of his eyes, she helped raise Percy from the couch, and supported his tottering steps to the adjoining chamber, which chanced to be her father’s. Then, hurrying back, she hastily arranged the cushions of the couch as comfortably as she could, and awaited the next sad visitant. The same doctor who had attended Captain Egerton, entered with the new patient, and brightening at the sight of Edith, said :

“May I engage you as my head-nurse again ? This patient deserves the best that skill and patience can do for him.”

Edith assented by a mute bend of the head, and seated herself, quietly awaiting further commands. Master Lawrence was not unconscious, as Percy had been, and he caught sight of Edith at once. No sooner was he laid on the couch than he beckoned her to his side, and said in a feeble voice :

“ I shall follow *him* soon. Do not grieve for us, we shall both have perished in the good cause.”

But Edith, whose self-possession in times of urgent need made her so good a nurse, took his cold hand in her warm one, and said in a cheerful voice, and with the frank smile of a child :

“ Nay, I cannot spare my old master yet. He will recover, believe me, and live to make the world the wiser.”

And her words proved prophetic. For, although Master Lawrence's life hung long in the scale between time and eternity, yet Edith's many months of patient nursing were rewarded at last by his complete recovery. And with the renewed boon of life came renewed energy, and a fresh eagerness to resume again the pursuit of those

studies which had been the love of his life, till his love for his fair pupil had supplanted them.

A close friendship existed to the end between these two, but it was the old friendship of master and pupil renewed. His mistress henceforth was knowledge, diligently sought, and sent forth again for the good of the world, in works dedicated to their inspirer, and read by her with eagerness and profit. But few who knew the learned Dr. Lawrence in his later years, would have credited the tale of his passionate love for the Fair Maid of Taunton, and of his desperate bravery as a soldier in the fight for liberty.

We who know it can guess whence came the inspiration for the highest flights of his fancy, and the discipline which enabled him to dig so deeply and perseveringly in the mines of wisdom.

All this, however, is anticipating, and we must return to the eventful time when Master Lawrence first laid him down on his couch of sickness, and Percy Egerton leant tottering against the window in the adjoining room.

No sooner had Master Peyton left his

wounded comrade in safe hands, than he entered his own chamber to refresh his soiled and blood-stained person. The vision that met his eyes as he did so, arrested him on the threshold. Though far from superstitious in general, the pale, emaciated figure of Percy, rendered still more shadowy by the deepening twilight, startled him out of his wonted calm, and jumping to the conclusion that Captain Egerton had died during the day, and that his spirit had already returned to harass him, he exclaimed :

“Have I not been punished enough ? or is it to be ever thus, that, in the moments of triumph, yon ghastly spectre will return to haunt me till I die ?”

“Good Master Peynton,” said Percy, in the easy manner and tone which there was no mistaking, “I trow it is but the ghosts of the dead, if any, that we have to dread ; and thanks, under Providence, to the good tence I have had in your house, I am still in the flesh, though a terrible scarecrow, I fear ! But never mind, I have that at my heart which will act as an elixir of life, and put all the doctors to the blush. Pray let it not

offend you that I speak on such a subject just now, but honour forbids longer silence. Master Peynton, I crave of you the greatest treasure you possess. It is, in troth, a bold boon for one so unworthy to crave, and an enemy withal. My only excuse is, that in granting me such unspeakable bliss, you will render your daughter also happy."

Percy had spoken easily, in spite of a certain doubtfulness as to the reception of his suit. But he was not prepared for the stern Puritan's indignation.

"My daughter, sirrah! Can I believe my ears? Dare you in this place, and at this time, prefer so monstrous a request? Nay, though Edith is dearer to me than life, yet rather a thousand times would I see her laid by her brother in the churchyard, than united to one of the followers of that false-hearted tyrant, Charles Stuart! Was it not enough that you drew away my first-born to his ruin, but would you deprive me of my daughter also, and make a true-hearted girl become a renegade? Is this your return for my hospitality? Were it not for your spectre-face I would turn you out of my house forth-

with; as it is, I charge you on your honour—if such a word is recognised in your court language—to hold no further communication with my daughter, now or ever.”

The worthy burgher had put himself in a towering passion, or he would hardly have spoken as he did. And this anger was all the more uncontrollable, for his usual firm self-restraint. Percy Egerton had the advantage over him, and he kept it. Drawing himself proudly up, he said with that perfect calmness so irritating to an excited man :

“ I will not retaliate, good sir, nor stoop to vindicate my conduct, which calls for no excuse. Neither will I pledge my honour to obey your unreasonable demands. The followers of King Charles make no promises, when they do not intend to keep them. But I will, by your leave, quit this house and town at once, if you will obtain for me the favour of a pass through your lines.”

So saying, he moved unsteadily across the room, but was obliged to grasp at the angry father's arm for support, as he passed him. Finding his weakness still so great, he paused and said :

“By your leave I will remain yet another night beneath your roof. Perchance, too, the event of to-morrow’s hostilities may make the presence of a Cavalier as your guest, no unwelcome defence.”

“Remain, by all means,” replied Master Peynton with recovered dignity. “But think not to retaliate upon us with your undesired protection. Know, young man, that as our forces drew off for this night’s repose, the boom of our friends’ artillery resounded from the Blagdon hills, and that we await but the morrow’s sun to put your brave comrades to flight.”

“Ha! is it so?” cried Percy. “Then indeed is it time I were gone. If I may not live for love, I can at least die for my King and my country. It is to you, sir, that I owe this loathsome inaction, when my comrades are at their sorest pinch. But I forgive you for fair Edith’s sake, since sooner or later, if I live, trust me she shall be mine.”

“A thousand times, no!” replied Master Peynton, turning on his heel, and beckoning Nurse Ursula, who was on the landing with-

out, to come and take charge of her roaming patient.

The kind old woman hastened to Percy's aid, and rated him soundly for the fright he had given her, in escaping from his sick-room during her absence. Truth to tell, the prevailing excitement of that day had affected even old Ursula, and she had just stepped out to hear how things were going on, when Percy, influenced by the same impulse, made his journey to Hugh's chamber. She had discovered his disappearance, and was going in search of him, when her master had hailed her, to conduct the sad procession of Master Lawrence's bearers to Hugh's room.

For that night Percy Egerton remained at Gable House, but ere sunrise next morning he was gone; leaving no token behind him save a small packet directed to Edith, which Ursula duly conveyed to her young mistress, and was amply rewarded for her pains, by seeing the colour once more mount into her faded cheeks, as she opened the packet and a long Cavalier love-lock fell out upon her lap, together with a letter. The letter was for the most part an outpouring of devotion from

her lover, in language that seemed to Edith more eloquent than any that had ever been penned. But it concluded with a short account of his interview with her father, with a declaration of his own determination to fight for his King to the last drop of his blood, and with the consequent uncertainty of their ever meeting again. And as Edith read the manly words in which he bade her hold herself free, but declared his own unalterable faithfulness, tears fell upon the paper, and our heroine registered a vow of constancy in her heart, which nothing on earth should make her break. She little guessed then, in the hopefulness of a first love, to how severe a proof her vow might be put.

Meantime, the events passing around her were too engrossing to give her any leisure for selfish fears. She thrust the precious packet into her pocket, and feeling her heart strengthened for anything by her new-found joy, left Ursula in charge of her patient, and went forth from the sick-room to seek her father.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE PEOPLE GAVE THANKS ON THE ELEVENTH OF MAY.

MASTER PEYNTON had but spoken the truth, when he told Percy Egerton so confidently of the approach of the rescuing party. That boom of artillery from the Blagdon hills, which Blake, counting the echoes carefully, had recognised as the preconcerted signal of their friends, had raised high the hopes of the brave garrison on the previous evening. The Governor had made his preparations to co-operate with the relief party, in an attack on the superior force of the enemy, and having so done, he and his comrades had gone to sleep that night, in sanguine expectation of the morrow. But there might well have been anxious, nay, even despondent hearts among the townsfolk,

for Berkeley's force was sufficiently superior in numbers, to have been able to spare a division larger than the relief party itself, to check Welden's movements, and yet at the same time maintain the siege in all its vigour. Thus this Sunday morning, the 11th of May, 1645, had dawned on many an anxious heart and face among the people, as calmly as their leader bore himself in this crisis of their fate, and brave and high as beat the hearts of the garrison.

Relief, however, came sooner than had been dreamed of. The troops were mustering in the Bull-ring and in the Castle-yard, when news was brought which sent a thrill of joy through the whole town. The Royalist troops were already in full retreat on the roads towards Ilchester and Bridgwater, having struck their tents in the night, and abandoned their entrenchments before sunrise!

Trusty scouts were sent out to ascertain the truth of these reports, and being assured of their veracity, and the long lines of retreating Cavaliers being visible also from St.

Mary's Tower, "Blake sounded his trumpet for a sortie, and passing through East Gate, he fell on the stragglers and rear-guard, put them to rout, seized a pile of arms, cleared the orchards and meadows lying between the Chard and Bridgwater highways, and would have pursued the fugitives farther, only that they had taken the precaution to make the roads in their rear impassable for cavalry by cutting down the trees and throwing them across for barricades. Their retirement from the works, after so long a siege, produced a powerful reaction on the inhabitants, and the pious people flew to St. Mary's to return thanks for so unexpected a mercy. Welman took for his text the words of Malachi—'I am the Lord: I change not: therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.' And the fervid preacher exhorted them to continue to put their trust in the Lord of Hosts. He assured them that their cause was the cause of Heaven, and that all the powers of earth could not prevail against it. The miraculous retreat of the royal army—since, in the opinion of its own commanders, it was equal to twice the number of Roundheads then

arrayed against it—gave point and meaning to the preacher's words ; and just as the congregation had risen to his own height of enthusiasm, several persons ran into the church gasping out—' Deliverance ! deliverance ! ' A squadron of Welden's horse had galloped unopposed to the very works of East Gate, and exchanged greetings with the defenders. The people rose to their feet at these magic words ; some embraced their friends and children ; others ran wildly about in the extravagance of their joy ; many rushed for the doors, anxious to get ocular demonstration of this good news. But Welman called to them in a loud voice to pause, and having recovered silence in the sacred edifice, he motioned them with a solemn gesture to kneel down and join with him in giving thanks, where thanks were most due, for so great and unexpected a mercy."*

A touching sight it was to see that kneeling multitude, under the noble roof and amid the stately pillars of that fine old church, reverently bowing their heads in heartfelt

* Hepworth Dixon's " Robert Blake," chap. iii. pp. 99, 100.

thanksgiving to the Almighty, before going forth to partake in the triumph without. Pinched, pale faces, with hungry-looking eyes, were raised in fervent gratitude, as the congregation rose from their knees, and quietly left the church.

The triumph had been gained by many a life-long loss, and by much privation and suffering nobly born. One there was kneeling there, well-known to us, whose heart cried out in the midst of her thanksgiving, for the sainted brother who had so earnestly prayed for this hour, and who was no longer by her side to rejoice with her.

“And yet,” thought Edith to herself, “perhaps he knows; who can tell?”

It was the longing for his sympathy which drew her to his quiet grave in the corner of the churchyard, when the congregation had dispersed. It was there she could offer up her thanks the best, and it was there her father found her some time later, when he too, released at last for awhile from his military duties, had leisure to seek the same quiet spot to offer up his thanks. Silently they stood there for awhile. At last the father

spoke in a voice so shaken and altered, that Edith looked up in alarm.

"Child," he said, "promise me that *you* will not forsake me too; that you will not condemn me to a lonely and embittered old age. One son a saint in heaven, the other a reprobate. Oh! Edith, promise me *you* will not turn a renegade too."

"Father," replied the girl, looking earnestly at him out of her fearless blue eyes, "I care not to make promises, nor to boast of my love and duty, but believe me you may trust me in both."

"Enough, my daughter; promise me but one small boon; I have ever found thee true and will ask no more. Promise me never to cherish in your heart the memory of a base Cavalier, and I shall be satisfied. Nothing will be too good for my Edith then. I am not such a selfish old man as to wish to keep my treasure to myself. She will have many a worthy suitor for her hand. Promise me only to guard the citadel of your heart against all false-hearted knaves, and all will be well."

"No need to promise that, my father,"

answered the girl, with a smile of winning sweetness; "that citadel has capitulated already to the truest knight and courtliest gentleman that e'er won maiden's heart. My filial love and duty are all your own, my father, but I have plighted my heart's troth to Percy Egerton."

Master Peynton spake not for the space of five minutes; he was striving to conquer the passion which the thought of Percy's suit aroused in him. At last, in a constrained voice, he said:

"That young gallant will have found his *congé* ere this, I guess, amid the stragglers that were cut off in the retreat; he hardly looked in marching order, when I had my farewell interview with him last evening. Perchance, fair daughter, I may venture to ask one favour of your vaunted filial duty. You will not, at all events, wed without my consent? With so slight a concession I must content me, it seems."

The sarcastic tone in which he spoke, stung the girl to the quick, as coming from her indulgent father.

"Oh! father, father!" she cried piteously,

“ what have I done to deserve this ? Have I ever acted deceitfully towards you ? Have I ever disobeyed your commands, that you should taunt me thus ? No ; I promise you, without your consent I will not wed—nor,” she added, raising her head with quiet dignity, “ with your consent either, my father, unless the husband you give me be he who holds my troth. A Puritan maiden should be faithful, methinks, as well as dutiful.”

And so the matter ended for the present, and the father and daughter returned home together for the first time with discord between them.

Edith was the less conscious of this feeling of the two. She had given her promise knowing the sacrifice it might entail ; but when the path of duty lay so plainly marked out, she had no thought but to follow it.

“ I should be no fit wife for him, were I to go to him without a father’s blessing,” she said to herself ; “ and meantime we can wait. Is it not enough to know that our hearts are one ? True love *must* conquer at last. And I can always pray for him meanwhile.”

And so Edith went about her arduous duties with a brave, bright heart. Ever bringing sunshine into Master Lawrence's sick-room, guiding her father's large household prudently, and aiding in administering relief to the exhausted garrison and people.

It was gratifying to the brave defenders of Taunton, to see the wonder and pity expressed on the rough faces of Welden's soldiers, at the sight that greeted them, when about four o'clock on that Sunday afternoon, the 11th of May, the main body reached the town. Nor was it by their looks only, that they testified their sympathy with the starving garrison. Worn and "harassed as they were by the march over hilly and broken roads, the relief party refused to touch a morsel of the still remaining provisions; and after effecting the first object of their visit, returned that very night towards Chard."*

Pitiful indeed was the state of the town; more than a third part of it had been burnt or battered down by artillery, and the state of the poor homeless, starving inhabitants was truly deplorable.

* Hepworth Dixon's "Life of Robert Blake," chap. iii.

Gable House was turned into a sort of orphanage for the time being, of which the poor clerk's two children, and Hugh's *protégée* little Polly, formed the nucleus ; and Edith and Ursula had to tax their resources to the utmost, to stow away, and provide for, the daily increasing numbers that claimed their hospitality.

Meantime the heroic resistance of Taunton, and its gallant relief, were celebrated in London by bonfires.* A general thanksgiving was appointed. Letters of thanks were despatched to General Fairfax for having sent the relief corps ; and Welden and his officers received the nation's thanks for their successful expedition. While Blake, the garrison, and the townsfolk, were all lauded as heroes for their zeal, courage, and self-sacrifice, in having maintained a town without walls or military defences, and already exhausted by a long siege and blockade, for fifty days against such overwhelming numbers !

But the sufferings of the devoted town were not yet over, in spite of this brief respite. Goring, who had been recalled from

* See *Ibid.*

the west, was despatched thither again by Charles to cover the leaguer before Taunton, and to crush the new model army with which Fairfax was moving towards Somerset and Devon. Thus once more that dreaded Goring, whose "crew" had been the terror of the neighbourhood not long ago, again overran the fair vales of Somerset, spreading dismay wherever he went, with the daily and nightly deeds of violence perpetrated by his soldiery. He himself had made a terrible oath, it was said, that he would reduce the haughty town or lay his bones in its trenches.

He fell upon Welden with superior force and drove him into the narrow passes of the hills, so that but for some blunder in the giving of the orders, the retreat of Welden's force would have been difficult, if not impossible. As it was, two divisions of Royalists, under Courtney and Colonel Thornhill respectively, having been sent by different routes to cut off the retreat of the Roundheads at Petherton Bridge, fell on each other with such eagerness, that it was not till both officers were wounded, and one taken prisoner, and many persons killed, that the blunder

was discovered ; and while they were fighting Welden escaped into Taunton. Goring followed on his rear, and the devoted town was once more invested on all sides !

Dunster Castle, Langport, Ilchester, and Bridgwater, all afforded rallying-points for the enemy. Goring, however, did not attempt to take the place by assault, but trusted to the strictness of his blockade reducing the town ere long by starvation, boasting that the addition of Welden's party to the mouths to be fed, would lessen the period of resistance.

Blake saw where their danger lay, and tried to counteract it by sending out frequent sallies into the neighbouring country. Nearly every day foraging-parties went forth, and seldom returned without provisions or prisoners. Some indeed were cut off in their bold efforts, but the spirits of the garrison only rose with each fresh encounter.

An incident occurred about this time characteristic of the Governor's sarcastic humour. Goring one day, by way of insult, sent a poor fellow dressed in rags, and with a tattered drum, into the town, asking an

exchange of prisoners; the Governor expressed his contempt for the insult, "not by hanging the poor drummer, or by harsher treatment of the prisoners—but by dressing the man in a new suit of clothes, and by setting all the prisoners free without ransom or conditions!"

This story Edith carried to Master Lawrence's sick-room, as she did all that might interest him, and a laugh for the first time broke from his thin lips, and echoed through the silent chamber.

Another day she brought him stirring tidings of Colonel Welden's bravery, even to rashness, and of Blake's gallant rescue. How Welden and his horse had made a sortie, and been received by Goring so firmly that his ranks were broken and his troop put in peril. How the ever-watchful Blake had descried his danger from St. Mary's tower, had instantly sounded his trumpets for a sortie, and forming two squadrons of his veteran horse in the market-place, had led them himself through East Reach, and fallen on the enemy's flank, thus throwing the Royalists into momentary confusion, and enabling

Welden to disengage himself and return towards the town—Blake disputing every inch of the way with his face to the enemy, and retiring in perfect order.

“Hugh might well have been proud of his hero,” sighed the girl, as she ended her narrative; “I think he is almost the greatest man alive.”

“And who may that happy man be, fair mistress?” asked the Governor himself, entering the room just as Edith was finishing her story, on one of his frequent flying visits to his invalid captain.

“Yourself, noble sir,” answered Edith unhesitatingly, with flushed and eager face.

“Thank you, my child, for your confidence. Please God, it shall not be misplaced. We men of action need the faith of the pure and good to uphold us in the right, and to help us keep our hearts unsullied in the midst of strife. But what say you to *my* story, good Lawrence? It is one to touch the heart of an old commander, methinks. A party from the garrison of Lyme, have actually achieved the feat of forcing their way through the enemy’s camp, and bringing a supply of powder to

their old chief! And I have invited them as a reward, to witness to-morrow a grand sortie on the foe. So give us your good wishes, my friend, and you, fair mistress, prepare your bandages and cordials, for I fear me it will be a bloody encounter, to judge by the spirit of our men."

And, alas! so it proved. Four hundred Cavalier corpses were found in the trenches after the battle, and Edith, as she heard it, had no heart to rejoice in the victory, which had sent so many precious souls headlong to eternity.

"Oh! would it were all ended!" she cried out in bitter grief. "Can any cause, Master Lawrence, excuse such awful bloodshed?"

"Men must endure their going hence even as their coming hither. Ripeness is all," replied the tutor, in his favourite Will Shakspeare's words.

"Aye, but were they all ripe?" asked the girl, with quivering lips.

"We must leave that in higher Hands, my child," replied the master; in the old tone of calm authority he had been wont

to use to her when she was his pupil indeed.

And Edith bent her head in prayerful assent.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW MISTRESS PEYNTON VISITED LADY
CAREY IN LONDON.

AND now, at last, the siege is drawing to its final close.

The sortie mentioned in the last chapter had important results. *Goring withdrew his men five or six miles, thus giving the Round-heads a larger area. The Londoners, once more roused to action by the glorious news from Somerset, formed an association for sending relief to Taunton. A subscription was in a few days raised to the amount of four thousand pounds. Parliament, too, promised speedy aid ; and Colonel Massey distributed hand-bills in taverns and other places of resort, inviting volunteers to join him in an expedition to the west. Before he was pre-

* For these particulars, see Hepworth Dixon's "Robert Blake."

pared to start with the Government aid, the patriotic citizens had already equipped, at their own expense, one thousand horsemen.

Meantime, while Goring was employed before Taunton, the Cavalier cause was being decided on the field of Naseby, and the civil war was nearly at an end. Fairfax turned westward to raise the siege of Taunton, and met Massey at Blandford with three thousand new levies, especially raised for that purpose. The following day, in spite of the oath imputed to him, that he would conquer Taunton or lay his bones in its trenches, Goring burnt his tents and withdrew to Langport. Thither Fairfax followed him, and routed his troops in two or three short but destructive encounters.

The march of the Roundheads through the west was very victorious. Bristol, Bridgewater, Langport, and Ilchester were carried by storm. Taunton was freed, at last, from her enemies, and all the neighbouring strongholds, save Dunster Castle, were soon in friendly hands.

The latter part of the siege of Taunton had lasted five weeks, the former more than seven; but reckoning from the time when

Blake first seized the town, till Goring's final retreat, a whole year had elapsed! One of the King's best armies had been detained, and partially destroyed, by this wonderful defence. Some of his bravest captains had lost their lives in the trenches before Taunton, others had retired from it foiled, and the last attempt to blockade the town had cost the lives of 1,400 Cavaliers. Truly, it had been a marvellous defence!

“But alas! the condition of the poor town itself was most deplorable, and the once rich and cultivated country around, with its fair orchards and pasture-lands, was now like a dreary desert. Corn had been cut down green, fruit-trees destroyed, barns and mills emptied of their contents, and farm-houses ransacked and burnt.

“The relieving army noticed with horror, that between St. Nicholas and Taunton they marched for half-a-day without seeing a single human creature, or one human habitation standing, in the most populous and wealthy district of provincial England!”*

* See Hepworth Dixon's "Robert Blake."

In the suburbs of the town all was ruin. The work of destruction had been direly done. The streets had all suffered more or less, from the church on the one side, to the Castle on the other. A third of the houses had been either burnt, by "wild-fire and red-hot balls, or battered down by the artillery. Blake had the proud satisfaction to feel that he had kept his ground; but towards the end of his year of hard fighting, he was master of little more than a heap of rubbish."* His energy as a governor was prompt in relieving the distress of the town. He diminished the number of mouths to be fed, by sending off Welden's corps to the General's camp, and made arrangements for fresh provisions to be brought in from a distance, until the desolated land round about, could again be brought under cultivation.

It was a busy time for all the good burghers of Taunton, and Master Peynton was first and foremost among the workers. Both he and Edith were so busy from morning till night providing for the needs

* See Hepworth Dixon's "Robert Blake."

of the destitute, that they had little time for forebodings of any sort.

Edith's heart sank sometimes when she heard people talk of the Cavalier losses as though it were all matter of triumph. No tidings had reached her from Percy since that first eloquent letter, which had already begun to look old and worn from frequent reading. It acted as a talisman to her often; when, worn out with a hard day's work, thoughts of possible evils to come weighed down her spirit, then would she go to Hugh's chamber, —still kept untenanted, as sacred to his memory—and, sitting on the old, familiar couch, would draw out the precious paper from her bosom, and peruse, with ever fresh interest, the neatly-written lines of ardent love. But at last, as months flew by, this secret anxiety left traces on Edith's fair face, and her elastic step grew languid, and her manner listless and weary. Her father noticed it, and grew anxious in his turn.

One hot summer evening Colonel Blake, who had been devoting himself during the months that had elapsed since the raising of the siege, to promoting the welfare of his

party in Somersetshire ; called at Gable House, and remarked to her father, on Edith's quitting the room, that the " fair maid of Taunton " seemed to droop, suggesting that the long trial of her strength and spirit was at last beginning to tell.

" Take heed to her, my friend," he said ; " you have a treasure at your hearth, let it not slip through your fingers."

Thoroughly alarmed and panic-stricken, the poor father told his fears to his friend, in a tone so calm that it betrayed not the turmoil within. He related how Marmaduke had been a friend of the young Cavalier's who had been quartered upon them, ere Blake himself came to their rescue. How lightly Edith seemed then to esteem their unbidden guest. How he himself had struck him down in the heat of battle, when the lad had abstained from harming his former host ; how Egerton had been brought badly wounded to Gable House, when its master had feared him slain by his own hand ; and how, as the climax of all, the young Cavalier had confronted him, in his own chamber, on the very eve of their deliverance, like a ghost

returned from the dead, and had dared to ask him for the hand of his daughter. How he had himself denounced him, and driven him from his house, but not until Edith had given him her troth, and, as he feared, her heart withal.

“And where is the young fellow now, think you?” asked the Colonel.

“I heard of him only to-day, as having fought gallantly at Naseby, in spite of weakened health, and of being a favourite attendant on Charles Stuart,” answered Master Peynton.

“In troth, the lad shows good mettle to hold so fast by his falling cause; and I like him for restraining his eager young arm from hurting one who had shown him hospitality,” said the Colonel. “But we cannot bestow so great a prize as the ‘fair maid of Taunton’ on a Cavalier, be he ever so generous and brave. You must take the young mistress to London, my friend; I will procure you introductions if you need them, and she shall have the choice of our brave lads, and a pretty dower withal to add to her pretty face.”

“As to the dower, my purse is not drained

yet, for all that has come and gone," said the burgher. "My child shall not want for fair dowry, so be her choice tally with mine. I will do as you say. Her mother's connections are chiefly on the wrong side, but there is a certain Lady Carey, a first cousin of my wife's, who thinks with us, and who will be pleased to have so fair an excuse for going into society again. I will take Edith to London as you suggest; the child has never left the West yet, a change will do her good, and scatter all foolish fancies."

So Edith left her "happy valley," and went forth to see the world. And her father thought his plan had succeeded marvellously, when, on the very day after their arrival at Lady Carey's town mansion in the Strand, he saw the cloud lift off Edith's brow, and the old animation return to her face, and the wonted vivacity to her conversation.

He thought it was the company at dinner that had done it, for a handsome young nephew of my lady's had been earnest in his attentions to the new Somersetshire beauty. But, in truth, he himself had lifted that cloud, when, in reply to a question from their

hostess concerning her rash young acquaintance, Percy Egerton, he had retailed the information which he had given to Colonel Blake before.

No wonder Edith was happy again. Percy was safe, and in honour; what more did she want? There was nothing selfish in her love.

So she enjoyed all the City sights, and all the fine company, and was a favourite wherever she went. Lady Carey took care, too, to let it be known, that Taunton was famed for the richness of its burghers, as well as the beauty of its women; and suitors came in abundance. But to all of them Edith turned a deaf ear.

Lady Carey grew indignant at last, and expostulated with her young kinswoman. Our heroine, too, grew weary of these importunities.

"Do ticket me 'engaged,' dear Lady Carey," she said in playful reply to one of these attacks. "I may never be married, it is true, for my father withholds his consent, but I shall never change. My troth is plighted, as you know. And if these gentle-

men knew it too, they would surely let me alone."

"Troth! and would they though?" exclaimed the indignant lady; "there is no faith-keeping with foes. So evil a promise were better in the breaking than the keeping, methinks. Hist! child, you will not be for disgracing your family by marrying a traitor, and breaking your poor father's heart?"

"A man is no traitor for being faithful to his King, be that King worthy or no. And as to promises, it ill befits those who condemn the poor Charles Stuart for his breach of them, to treat them so lightly, methinks," answered the girl with spirit. But immediately returning to her usual gentle manner, she added: "Prithee forgive my impatience, and let us talk no more on this matter. I have pledged my word to both my father and lover, and I mean to keep it to both."

Lady Carey said no more, but pondered late that night; and when she at last laid her down to rest, it was with an assurance of success at her heart.

A few weeks after this a letter was brought to Edith at the breakfast-table, which made her start. It was not one of the billets she was in the habit of receiving from some of her admirers, containing assurances of undying devotion, or reproaches for her cruel insensibility.

It had come by a special messenger, and was sealed with a coat-of-arms, and surely the neat writing was familiar to her heart?

Nervously she opened it, and cautiously her hostess scanned the changing expressions on her face as she read.

“What ails thee, pretty maiden?” she said at last. “Is it a repetition of his vows, from thy Cavalier squire? May I see it, my child? Belike I can counsel thee in thy strait.”

Edith arose, and paused a moment, with the missive clutched nervously in her hand; then, hastily throwing it on the table before her kinswoman, she hurried to her chamber to hide her shame and her grief. And yet it was but a simple letter, that had caused this passion of weeping which now overwhelmed

our heroine. It was from Percy Egerton, and ran as follows :

“Tidings have reached me, fair mistress, of your brilliant success in society ; I marvel not at it. The jewel which I was so blessed as to discover in its hidden recess, needed but to be brought to the light to dazzle all beholders. I write now, not to express any jealousy of my more fortunate rivals, but—knowing the uprightness of your nature—to release you from any claim you may think I have on your fidelity. I am tied to a falling cause, and bound as I am, life and estates, to serve my King to the last, I am in no fit case to enter the lists for so great a prize as yourself. Choose well, fair mistress, and be happy, and cast a kindly thought sometimes on him who subscribes himself, now and ever,

“ Your humble servitor,

“ PERCY EGERTON.”

The words had burnt themselves into poor Edith's heart never to be forgotten ; no need to keep the paper on which they were writ.

“He has thrust me from him,” she cried in her anguish. “He thinks me so light a thing, that in prosperity alone can I be faithful to those I love. He flings me back my troth unasked. But I will not cringe even to him. He shall see that the burgher maiden can bear repulse bravely at all events, even though it wound her to the quick. And in this spirit she sat down and wrote her short reply.

“HONOURED SIR,

“We burgher maidens wot not much of courtly ways, and perchance I read not your letter aright in deeming that you wish to ignore the past. And yet methinks that must perforce be its meaning. You fling me back my plighted troth, and I, sir, cancel yours. But think not that I heed the foolish homage of which you speak. We Taunton maidens, ‘wear not our hearts upon our sleeves for daws to peck at.’ Mine yearns even now to be back at Gable House, for though your London may be fine, it is not so fair as our vale, methinks; nor is all its false gaiety of any worth, compared to the honest

peace of my quiet home. I fear I write
foolishly; my heart is sore. Forgive it, good
sir, and her who subscribes herself,

“Yours faithfully,

“EDITH PEYNTON.”

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW AUNT EDITH TOLD HER STORY.

AND so the chain was snapped that bound these loving hearts together, outwardly at all events, whatever cords might still pull secretly at their heart-strings. Edith insisted on returning at once to her father's house, in spite of Lady Carey's eager remonstrances, who had set her heart upon a brilliant marriage for her fair young kinswoman, with a wealthy and talented member of the all-powerful Parliament. It would have been a connection to raise her own social status, and Lady Carey—Puritan though she was by profession—in reality worshipped Mammon as ardently as any of the gay Cavalier ladies, whom she was wont so zealously to denounce. Therefore it was

with no little irritation, that she saw her young kinswoman depart in spite of all her diplomacy, as firmly determined as ever to listen to none of her new suitors, and with one great longing in her heart, which her politeness could not enable her to hide entirely from her hostess—to be at peace once more with her father, in her country home.

“It is the burgher blood in her veins that unfits her for any high estate!” exclaimed the haughty old lady angrily, as she turned away from watching Edith’s departure.

But Edith, unheedful of her delinquencies, greeted lovingly every landmark that brought her nearer her old home; and it was with tears of joy and sorrow mixed, that she flung herself at last into her father’s arms, as she alighted from the post-chaise at the White Hart Inn.

Master Peynton himself was scarcely less moved. It had been a harder trial to him than Edith had guessed, to part with his beloved daughter for so long a time. And the joy of reunion kept at first all other thoughts away. But he soon discovered

that Edith was no longer the arch merry maiden she had been, when first our story opened; her London visit had not restored her former spirits, although, to her partial father's eyes, it seemed to have added a fresh grace to her beauty.

There was much to talk over between father and daughter that evening as they sat in the oak-panelled parlour, where Edith had kept that anxious night-watch, which had probably done much towards changing her liking for the young Cavalier into an unconfessed, but abiding love. Master Peynton had had it tastily refurnished during his daughter's absence, and was amply repaid for his pains by the childish delight Edith took in all he had done.

"I never want to go away from you and my home again," she said, seating herself on a low stool beside her father, with her hands clasped on his knees, and her face turned to his in happy content. "And now tell me all the news."

And then he told her the good tidings, how that all things were righting themselves in the sorely-tried town, how that the

sufferers from the siege had been relieved as far as possible, how that trade had revived briskly, and how that his own business (which was a large wholesale one in the woollen department) had never been more prosperous. Of Marmaduke too he had had good tidings. His wounds had prevented him from serving any longer as a soldier, and he was now an inmate in the home of one of his Devonshire friends, whither he had been conveyed by Percy Egerton, and where he had been tended with the utmost kindness during his long period of weakness. He had in the same despatch which bore these tidings, informed his father of his betrothal to the only daughter and heiress of his kind entertainer, asking his father's forgiveness and blessing. Both of these Master Peynton had accorded, though somewhat reluctantly.

Thus Edith had very much to cheer her on her return home. But notwithstanding it all, there was a wistful sadness and pensiveness about her always now, which puzzled her father sorely. She went about her household duties as diligently as usual, resumed her long-discontinued studies, visited her friends,

both rich and poor, and was ever ready to cheer her father with her ready sympathy and pleasant companionship ; but the old brightness had gone from her eyes, and the merry smile from her lips. At last Master Peynton bethought him to write to Lady Carey, asking her if she could throw any light on the subject.

Now whether it were her letter in reply, or whether Edith's dutiful uncomplaining ways moved him, we cannot say, but he startled the maiden one evening as they sat silently together in the short winter twilight, musing over the blazing logs in the oak-panelled parlour, by saying :

“ Edith, you have been a dutiful child to me, and true all thy days, and I did wrong to extort that promise from thee by thy brother's grave. I did many things that were wrong in the heat of those war times, methinks. Forgive thy old father, child, and marry whom thou wilt. It is fit thou shouldest have a protector when my bones are laid by Hugh's. And so he be worthy of thee, I will no longer stand in the way, though he be ten times a Cavalier !”

“Father!” exclaimed Edith, throwing her arms around him and sobbing like a child on his breast, “I shall never marry and leave thee now, but I thank thee all the same. He is worthy of the best father, but he is not for me. And I,—I am only for you, and for the duties God gives me to do. He will be my Protector, father, both now and ever.”

And so, though the permission had come as it seemed too late, yet the giving of it, and the confidence thus restored between father and child, added greatly to their happiness in one another. And as the years sped on, Edith and her father became almost a byword for filial love among their fellow-townfolk. Parents whose children proved rebellious, would point out fair Mistress Edith walking with her father, as a sad contrast to their own state. And children treated harshly at home, would look wistfully into the old man's face, as he passed them leaning on the arm of his graceful daughter. That one reference to the past, that one reversal of his stern decree, had removed the only barrier between them, and now they seemed to live for each other and for their duty to God and man.

Master Peynton's character softened, and Edith's deepened, as the years rolled on. When the sad tidings came of the King's death, met by him in so kingly a manner, Master Peynton entered into his chamber and wept silently—tears of which his manhood was not ashamed. And Edith, resorting to her old refuge, St. Mary's Church, knelt in fervent prayer for all the sorrowing followers of the murdered King, and for pardon to his murderers. Her thoughts flew off to her former lover—as they did indeed daily when his name recurred in her devotions—and her heart bled for his grief in the loss of his beloved master.

No direct tidings had reached her from Percy since that fatal letter received at Lady Carey's, between two and three years ago. But vague rumours had come of his betrothal to some Cavalier lady of rank, and of the death of his widowed mother, and of the sequestration of his ancestral estates by the new Commonwealth. But although Edith thus looked upon her buried love as a thing of the past, yet she had admitted none other to its place. She felt no craving for the

homage from men so precious to many beautiful women, but passed a tranquil, happy life, endeared to her fellow-townsfolk by her unselfish kindness and ready sympathy, and precious to her father beyond all earthly treasures. Master Peynton had received many proposals for her hand, but to all she had turned a deaf ear.

And thus our story passes over the quiet intervening years, and hurries to its conclusion.

The death of the King was now a thing of the past. The Commonwealth was at the height of its prosperity. And the English navy, under the heroic Admiral Blake—who had been strongly against the execution of the King—was ruling the sea. Master Peynton's hair was whitening, and his strength beginning to fail. Marmaduke came to see him ever and anon, with his pretty, aristocratic-looking wife, and their rosy little ones, these latter increasing in number by each returning visit, and bringing ever fresh claims on Aunt Edith's love and kindness.

It was a delicious afternoon in early spring,

and our heroine had made an excursion in search of snowdrops, to deck Hugh's grave in the quiet churchyard. She had taken with her her eldest nephew, who was on a visit alone at Gable House just then. A sturdy little chap of eight years, and a great favourite of his aunt's, perchance for the sake of his name, which was Hugh, though in all but name he was the exact opposite of his delicate, spiritually-minded uncle. A veritable little John Bull was Master Hugh; tight golden curls formed a sort of halo round his head, and bright brown eyes looked you boldly in the face. The "little general" his father called him, so sturdy was his make, so eager his delight in stories of battle and adventure.

On the afternoon in question, Edith had mounted him on a donkey, and walking herself by the donkey's side, they had made their expedition to the pretty stream where the snowdrops grew, at the foot of Pickeridge hill in the picturesque village of Corfe, some three miles distant from the town. They had filled their baskets and were returning laden with their lovely spoils, as the sun was slowly

sinking on the lap of some rose-tinted clouds. Hugh was getting weary, and had been clamorous for a tale.

“A tale about the siege, auntie—a real good tale, one I have never heard before,” had begged the boy, throwing one arm coaxingly round her neck, as she walked beside him.

And Edith, looking dreamily away at the golden sunset, felt suddenly one of the scenes of her past life start into vivid reality again, and before taking time to think, she began relating her adventure when she had been to visit Hugh's father in Dame Ursula's cottage. The boy listened in breathless interest to the account of the shadow that fell on the casement, as she had talked with his father within whilst he devoured his pasty, to the description of her going out alone into the twilight and the fears that had come into her mind, to her entering the dark Roman Causeway and being startled by the lurking shadow which she had well-nigh taken for a ghost, till the climax was reached by her being stopped by a Cavalier, who proved after all to be but his father's friend. There she

paused, blushing and confused ; and Hugh, peering with his sharp eyes into her face, said :

“ And what happened then, pretty auntie ? He didn't strike you dead, else you wouldn't be here to tell it. What did he do ? ”

“ He walked with me till we came to the Priory meadows, and then he went away, ” said Edith hurriedly.

“ And did he never come again ? ” asked the boy eagerly.

“ He was brought to Gable House wounded nigh to death after that, ” said Edith in a low voice, the terrible scene in the “ garden of death ” coming vividly before her again.

“ Oh ! ” cried the boy triumphantly, “ I know who it was then ! It was the handsome Captain Egerton of whom father loves to talk, and after whom he named my brother Percy. When I am a man I mean to be a brave Cavalier like him. Is he dead too, pretty auntie, like Uncle Hugh and the good King ? ” asked the boy in a softened voice.

Edith could not answer for a moment, unusual tears sprang to her eyes at the boy's gentle questioning. He saw them directly, and with the warm impetuosity of his nature, threw his arm again around her neck and said :

"Don't cry, auntie ; perhaps he'll come to life again like the good people in fairy stories. Don't cry. Oh ! see," cried the child, suddenly clapping his hands, "here comes my grandfather to meet us, and a fine gentleman with him with beautiful long curls, like the pictures of our Prince !"

Edith raised her eyes yet glistening with tears, and saw through that mist called up by the past, a figure from out that past approach her, supporting her father on his arm.

Tumultuously her heart beat ; she felt half suffocated with her emotions, and stood tremblingly awaiting them, leaning against the donkey for support ; while the sturdy Hugh, deeming that this handsome stranger might be in good truth the Prince Charles himself in disguise, had reined up his quiet

steed, and was waving his little plumed hat in the air. But in a moment his thoughts were turned into another channel, as he saw the stranger start forward and catch Edith in his arms, as she was falling in a swoon to the ground.

“Fetch water, little man, from yonder streamlet in my hat,” said the stranger, throwing the said hat on the ground, and disclosing, to the boy’s admiration, the full beauty of his Cavalier locks. Hugh obeyed with the utmost speed, and was again in a few minutes at the stranger’s side, gazing alternately with affright at his aunt’s white face, and with admiration at the handsome Cavalier; while Master Peynton knelt by his daughter, chafing her hands tenderly.

“Pretty auntie was crying when you came up, maybe that made her bad,” suggested Hugh, as he stood between the two anxious men, looking down at Edith’s white face. “She had been telling me a story of the siege—how she went to see my father at Nurse Ursula’s cottage, and was frightened in the causeway by a Cavalier who turned out to be my father’s friend, Captain Egerton. And

when I asked her if he was dead too, like Uncle Hugh and the good King, she did not answer, and I looked and saw she was crying. Do you think he is really dead?" asked the boy, looking anxiously into the stranger's face.

"Not yet, my brave boy, thank God," replied the stranger, in a tone of deep feeling. And as he spoke Edith's eyes unclosed at the familiar sound of his voice, and a smile flitted over her face.

"Come away home with me, little Hugh, and we will send out a carriage for Aunt Edith," said Master Peyton.

So the old man and the child withdrew, Hugh mounted on the donkey as before; and the lovers were left alone in the quiet country road, with the twittering birds, and the sunset.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW IT ALL ENDED.

THE water had quickly revived Edith's suspended animation, and as soon as she found herself alone with the Cavalier—who was hanging over her as she leaned against the bank, with the same light of love in his eyes which had shone there so long ago, when they had first plighted their troth in Hugh's chamber—a bright blush overspread her fair face, which she in vain tried to hide with her hands. Percy drew them away, covering them with kisses, as he murmured in a tone of deep content :

“Nay, sweet, shut not out the light from me now that at last I see it once more. The darkness has been long and deep enow, I trow, to make one long for the sunshine. But say, my heart's love, why have you

treated me so cruelly all these years? Never a word in reply to all my sad letters. Nought but that one brief note of calm and indignant dismissal!"

Edith aroused herself at this startling question, and explanations were soon made.

Lady Carey had written to Percy in the first instance, representing her young kinswoman as beset with eligible suitors, but deaf to all, from a foolish fancy that she was bound in honour to the young Cavalier, whom yet she must never marry. This letter had evoked Percy's note of self-renunciation, his own poor prospects giving weight to Lady Carey's suggestions. But divining from Edith's indignant but simple-minded reply, that he had as yet no successful rival in her heart, he had written to her again, letter upon letter of ardent love, all of which, addressed to Lady Carey's town-house, had been returned unopened, with an accompanying billet from that lady at last, bidding him persist no longer, as his addresses were unwelcome to the family. He had thought of writing direct to Gable House, but the remembrance of his dismissal thence by its

man's mind will fear that such a sea will
 be upon us as an imperious sea. The
 has come grief upon grief. His mother's
 death. The sequestration of his son.
 The death of his beloved King. After that
 he had gone abroad to join Prince Charles's
 adherents.

"But the manners of that Court misused
 me," he concluded; "and seeing no hope
 anywhere on this side the ocean for honorable
 service, I at last resolved to cross the main
 and seek an honest home among the Canadian
 settlers. I deemed you a happy wife long
 ere this, sweet mistress, and did but come
 to bid farewell to the home of my life's
 love."

"And you will not leave us again?" en-
 treated Edith, looking up with a wistful
 eagerness into the face, which, though hand-
 some still, bore the lines of sorrow and
 care.

"But to make a nest for thee, sweet bird,
 in the forests across the sea. Fear not.
 With such a goal in view, this arm will work
 wonders in briefest time."

"But my father!" said Edith tremulously.

"I would follow thee to the world's end, thou knowest, but I could not leave him to a lonely old age."

"We will talk of that anon, sweetheart," said Percy rapturously. "I have no thought just now, but for the present joy. Methinks I am half beside myself with infinite content."

How long they sat on that mossy bank, under the leafless elm-branches, talking of their love; neither ever knew. It was a bit of dream-land to Edith ever after, mingled always with the rose-hues of the sunset-clouds in her memory.

* * * * *

Percy did not build his nest in the Canadian forests. He built it instead under the eaves of Gable House. There he carried on the business for which Master Peynton's hands were growing too feeble. There he and Edith, with loving care, tended the last days of the honoured burgher. There Master Egerton acquired wealth, and reared a fair family to hand down his name, and his wife's virtues and beauty, to posterity.

The political sympathies of his descendants were divided, as might be expected from the contradictory traditions of their paternal and maternal ancestry. The eldest son was a staunch Republican; and on his father's retiring from business to the more congenial care of his ancestral property, when Egerton Hall and its dependencies were at the Restoration restored to their rightful owner, he took up the mantle of his maternal grandfather, as the traditional Taunton Burgher. His youngest sister, "the fair maid" of that date, lived with him, and, sharing his views, made one in the train of young maidens, who presented the flag embroidered with emblems of royal dignity to the unfortunate Monmouth, on his entry into the town, where, on the 20th of June, 1685, he was proclaimed King in the market-place.* And it cost her father a heavy fine, and the employment of all his Court influence, to save her from the slavery with which these damsels were threatened, as a punishment for their disloyalty.

On the other hand, his eldest daughter,

* See Macaulay's "History of England," vol. i. p. 588.

the dark-eyed Edith, married her cousin, the stalwart Hugh Peynton, Marmaduke's son and heir, and figured at Court as one of the brightest of its stars. Though being as good as she was beautiful, she was not so generally popular as many of her less gifted rivals. The young Hugh distinguished himself very early in life in the army, and was knighted for his services. He ever remained a favourite with his aunt Edith, and was gladly welcomed as a son, when he brought his bride to Egerton Hall after her presentation at Court.

But we must not forget that our task was to write the history of one "fair maid," not of many; nor allow ourselves to be beguiled into tracing out the careers of all her children. Suffice it to say, there was one scholar amongst them who sat at Master Lawrence's feet at Oxford, and in whom his mother's hopes were especially wrapped up, deeming that she saw in him a second John Milton. We refer our readers to the Biographical Dictionaries, to see whether her hopes proved correct.

For the chronicle of her virtues, and those of her husband, and of their progeny, we

refer them to that monument in a nameless church, where the kneeling figures of Percy Egerton, esquire, and of Dame Edith his wife, and their numerous offspring, make our own knees ache in sympathy.

THE END.





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